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Critical Attitudes to the Novels of  
Thomas Hardy 1870-1985

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onCritical Attitudes to the Novels of Thomas Hardy, 1870-1985.

In this thesis an examination is made of criticism of Thomas Hardy's novels from the earliest comments of his publishers and reviewers in the late nineteenth century to the apparently more sophisticated studies of the mid-1980's.

The thesis is organised chronologically with each chapter dealing with a specific historical period of not more than a few decades which marks a particular phase of criticism of Hardy's novels and which often reflects more general developments in critical attitudes to the novel as an art form. Thus, while much light is thrown on Hardy's own art as a novelist in the course of this study, its wider purpose has been to trace patterns of development in the theory and practice of novel criticism over the period 1870-1985 as a whole, and to examine the ideological assumptions which have informed it. In this sense criticism of Hardy's novels is a good subject for study because it reveals many features which may be said to be typical of the various phases of novel criticism; indeed, it often tells us far more about critical fashion and critical prejudice than it does about Hardy's art.

Because this thesis traces general patterns of development in criticism, there has been no attempt to be all-inclusive in the coverage of Hardy's critics; books and articles have been chosen for their representativeness or their special merit. All the major critics have been discussed, however, and the study concludes that what criticism has gained in sophistication of technique and mode of expression appears to have been counterbalanced by its having lost the ability to respond directly to the impact of reading a novel and by the corresponding loss of a sense that literature (in this case Hardy's novels) has any value which can be related to life. It is suggested that recent critics might benefit from a study of the methods of their predecessors so that they might learn from their successes as well as from their mistakes.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this study an examination is made of critical attitudes to Thomas Hardy's novels, starting with the earliest comments of the publishers and their readers and contemporary reviewers, and concluding with critical works written in the early 1980's. The examination concentrates upon Hardy's novels (though reference is made to his critical reputation as poet and short-story writer where appropriate) because it is one of the aims of this study to trace, through changing critical approaches to Hardy, the development of critical thinking about the novel as a genre. In the same way, although it is critical attitudes to the novels of Thomas Hardy which are the focus of the study, the reputations of other novelists are referred to for comparison and contrast.

The main purpose of such an examination as this is to discover what ideological assumptions have informed critical attitudes to Hardy's novels and hence determined the critical view of them and to show how and why those assumptions have altered over the century or so since Hardy started writing. While not necessarily subscribing to Terry Eagleton's Marxist critical perspective it is nevertheless possible to agree with him that 'criticism is not an innocent discipline, and never has been', and to endorse his claim that,

.....criticism does not arise as a spontaneous riposte to the existential fact of the text, organically coupled with the object it illuminates. It has its own relatively autonomous life, its own laws and structures: it forms an internally complex system articulated with the literary system rather than merely reflexive of it. It emerges into existence,

and passes out of it again, on the basis of certain determinate conditions.<sup>1</sup>

It is those 'determinate conditions' which form one of the main areas of interest of this study. In this context the novels of Thomas Hardy are an appropriate choice because they have attracted a substantial and varied body of critical writing and because this body of critical writing is highly illustrative of Eagleton's point that criticism is not 'organically coupled with the object it illuminates' but has 'its own relatively autonomous life'. In fact the original impetus for this study arose from my own dissatisfaction with existing criticism of Hardy's novels and a strong sense that the apparent inability to explain their power satisfactorily must stem from application of misconceived or inappropriate criteria. Those criteria must in turn depend upon the preconceptions and theories of the critics themselves.

A chronological mode of presentation was adopted partly for reasons already made clear (the wish to trace critical thinking about the novel as a genre; the way that wider historical and intellectual developments have affected critical attitudes) but also because an historical or chronological account of shifts in the critical perspective of Hardy's novels is able to reveal how one generation of critics acts and reacts in response to the judgements of the previous one. One of the objects of this study is to ascertain whether critical approaches to Hardy can be said to have advanced or merely to have altered course. This calls into question the nature, function and ultimate value of literary criticism which has not, on the whole, been very successful in its attempt to recover the essential Hardy - if such a phenomenon can be said to exist at all (and this, in itself, is a matter for much debate).

In a preface to a recent collection of critical essays on Hardy, R. L. Brett has summarised the position thus:

In spite of the amount of biographical and critical writing on Hardy in the last few years, a synoptic view of his artistic achievement has remained as elusive as ever; greater knowledge of his life has made his personality seem only more complex, and evaluations of his work have often seemed only to reflect the critical fashions of the times or the critical vagaries of their authors.<sup>2</sup>

However, if there is still no consensus view about the nature of Hardy's 'artistic achievement', his reputation as a major author is no longer in any real doubt. This was not the case until fairly recently. In 1934 Frank Chapman described Hardy's achievement as a novelist as showing 'a curiously qualified greatness'; David Lodge's comment in 1966 is much the same when he writes of Hardy's novels leaving us with 'a sense of greatness not quite achieved'; again in the sixties Irving Howe comments that Hardy is 'a classic not quite secure'. It is as recently as 1980 that Hardy is finally perceived by Norman Page to have become firmly established:

.....Hardy was for far too long underestimated, and it is only quite recently that recognition of his perhaps unique status as a major poet and a major novelist has become widespread..... Hardy has had a long wait for critical justice.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the fact that there is no 'synoptic view' of Hardy's artistic achievement testifies to the richness and variety of his work. It would certainly seem to be the case that Hardy's

reputation as a major author is based upon criteria other than strictly literary or artistic ones - his charting of a phase of English cultural and social history which appeals to our own sense of nostalgia, is one example; his sense of fate and his social criticism are others and are often considered quite independently of his artistic assimilation of them.

It is one of the purposes of this study, then, to investigate the nature of such critical readings of Hardy's novels and it is another to inquire into the kinds of attitudes and assumptions which inform them. Although Hardy's novels cannot be described as typical or representative in themselves, the approaches of critics to them are often highly representative of the critical thinking of a particular school or period about the novel, and in many cases tell us far more about the critics' assumptions than about Hardy's novels.

Because the emphasis of this study is upon criticism of Hardy's novels as part of a wider literary, historical and intellectual framework and because of the enormous amount of critical writing on Hardy as a novelist - particularly since about 1960 - it has been neither possible nor desirable to include every book and article that has been written since 1870. It was never my intention to provide an exhaustive survey of all available critical material but to indicate trends; it would be true to say, however, that I have had to read much of what has been written in order to select material for inclusion. Similarly, in Chapter One, which deals with the reviews of Hardy's novels, I have for the most part relied upon selections in Cox's Critical Heritage volume and in Lerner and Holmstrom's Thomas Hardy and His Readers: A Selection of Contemporary



Reviews. A thorough scrutiny of the reviews of every novel would, I think, require a thesis to itself but I have referred to original review articles in some cases where there seemed to be gaps in the coverage or where the selections might have shown bias (as could easily have been the case with the reception of Tess and Jude). Those reviews taken from the published selections have the page reference of the volume after the name and date of the periodical in the notes; any entries in the notes without such a reference indicate that I have consulted the original review article.

The division of the chapters at certain dates is to some extent the result of the need for a convenient length for each chapter and, like all divisions of this kind is open to the accusation of its being arbitrary. I have, however, attempted to divide the material into periods on a rational basis, according to different stages in the development of ideas on the novel in general or where there seemed to be a marked shift in critical emphasis in relation to Hardy's novels particularly - the two are hard to separate.

I make no apology for this being a further contribution to what has become known as the Hardy industry. Joan Grundy, in her introduction to Hardy and The Sister Arts (1979), is just one of the many recent critics to make a form of apology for adding to the bulk of critical writings on Hardy when she says that she feels like 'a gatecrasher upon an already crowded party'. It is my intention in this study not so much to attempt to gatecrash as to inquire into the nature of the gatecrashers' activities once at the party and to comment on their significance and also, to some extent, to try to discover why the party is so crowded and popular.

## NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology. London 1976.  
Verso paperback edition (1978) used here. p.17.
2. R. L. Brett, General Preface to N. Page (Ed.), Thomas Hardy -  
The Writer and His Background. London 1980.
3. N. Page (Ed.), Preface to Thomas Hardy - The Writer and His  
Background.

## CHAPTER ONE

### HARDY AND CONTEMPORARY REVIEWERS AND CRITICS

#### (I) Breaking into Fiction and Early Reviews

In July 1868, Thomas Hardy, then a young architect of twenty-eight, sent the manuscript of his first novel to the publisher, Alexander Macmillan. This novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, was never published; it was not until 1871 when Tinsley Brothers published Desperate Remedies that Hardy finally succeeded in his efforts to break into fiction. This period of almost three years during which Hardy attempted to get his work published is important because the advice given to the young writer by the publishers and their readers shows us what was expected of a typical marketable novel of the time. It also shows how Hardy responded to such expectations as well as to advice of a more artistically constructive nature which he received from several quarters.

Hardy began writing The Poor Man and the Lady after his return from London to Dorchester in 1868. Little is known of Hardy's years in London but the effects of city life on one born and bred in the West Country seem to have manifested themselves in this first novel, which Hardy describes in The Life as:

....a sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church-restoration, and political and domestic morals in general.... the tendency of the writing being socialistic, not say revolutionary....<sup>1</sup>.

We must take Hardy's word for this since The Poor Man and the Lady no longer exists even in MS. form. Hardy tells us in The Life that he lost it but it is much more likely that he destroyed it and this now seems to be the accepted view. The outline of the story is reproduced in An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress and bits of it are apparently to be found in other novels but the most interesting source of information about the novel is Hardy's correspondence with Macmillan, starting with the letter written to Hardy by Alexander Macmillan in August 1868.

Macmillan's comments on the submitted MS. indicate that he has read The Poor Man and the Lady himself but he also enclosed a report from John Morley who was at that time the firm's reader. Morley praises the opening rural scenes where, he says, 'much of the writing is strong and fresh'<sup>2</sup>. But he is clearly puzzled by the novel, calling it 'a very curious and original performance' and remarking on 'a certain rawness' which 'makes it read like some clever lad's dream'<sup>3</sup>. His overall verdict is that the novel shows promise but lacks polish in the style; one feels inclined to agree with John Sutherland's assessment of Morley's report:

His comments on Poor Man were conscientious, detailed and ultimately shortsighted. 4.

Macmillan's letter is long and shows a genuine interest in Hardy's work although praise is mixed with doubts about the novel's suitability for publication. Like Morley, Macmillan likes the portraits of rural life and seems largely in sympathy with the portrayal of the fashionable upper classes, describing it as 'sharp, clear, incisive' but also as 'wholly dark'<sup>5</sup>.

He feels sure that even the worst of the upper classes could not be as bad as Hardy paints them; their drawing room conversation about the working classes has 'some ground of truth' but is too excessive. Macmillan also criticises the novel for having an improbable story which he says 'would be looked on as a sort of Reynolds' Miscellany affair';<sup>6</sup> but he admires the poetical qualities of at least one scene and writes of the 'real power and insight' shown in another. All in all Macmillan's letter is quite encouraging considering that Hardy was an unknown author with no literary or other connections. Both Macmillan and Morley, although a little unsure what to make of the novel, recognise Hardy's talent and do not wish to deter him from further attempts at novel-writing. Morley remarks 'If the man is young, there is stuff and promise in him....'<sup>7</sup> and Macmillan closes his letter thus:

You see I am writing to you as a writer who seems to me of, at least potentially, considerable mark, of power and purpose. If this is your first book I think you ought to go on. 8.

An important point about the criticism of both Morley and Macmillan is that they both single out Hardy's treatment of rural life for especial praise; early comments of this nature led Hardy to write Under the Greenwood Tree and, initially at least, to develop this side of his writing rather than what appears to have been a predeliction for political and social comment. What also emerges from his early dealings with publishers and reviewers is that Hardy was quite prepared to listen to advice and to do whatever was necessary to achieve recognition as a novelist. This is shown when, after receiving

Macmillan's letter, he heard no more from the publisher (who still had the MS.) and wrote rather despairingly some time later asking what was happening about publication:

I almost feel<sup>that</sup> I don't care what happens to the book, so long as something happens....

and he adds as a postscript:

Would you mind suggesting, the sort of story you think I could do best, or any literary work I should do well to go upon?<sup>9</sup>.

We do not know Macmillan's advice to Hardy because this section of their correspondence is missing but from what has been preserved we can gather that Macmillan was on each occasion sympathetic and encouraging in his response to Hardy's work. Yet Macmillan did not publish The Poor Man and the Lady, finally informing Hardy that it was not suitable for his readers. He did, however, give Hardy an introduction to Chapman and Hall whom he thought might be interested in the work since they had more of a reputation for publishing radical and innovative literature than Macmillan. Macmillan's read and commented on Hardy's first three novels and, apart from actually publishing them, they could not have done much more for Hardy. Sutherland goes so far as to say of the relationship:

Arguably Hardy derived from his experiences with Macmillan's what amounted to an education in writing fiction.<sup>10</sup>.

Hardy's famous interview with George Meredith, who was Chapman

and Hall's reader at the time, sounds from his description of it in The Life, to have been more like a lecture. According to Hardy Meredith advised him,

....not to 'nail his colours to the mast' so definitely in a first book, if he wished to do anything practical in literature; for if he printed so pronounced a thing he would be attacked on all sides by the conventional reviewers, and his future injured.<sup>11</sup>

The advice, if accurately recorded by Hardy, is sound in so far as the power of the reviewers is concerned. Their pronouncements could make or break reputations and, given Hardy's sensitivity to criticism, a harsh periodical reception so early in his career might have been detrimental to his development as a novelist. We can see here already how difficult it could be for the conscientious artist or independent thinker to work in the fiction market. The novel's status as art was still uncertain and ill-defined in the late 1860's and early 1870's, although Graham tells us that 'by the eighties there is much less questioning of fiction's eligibility to be an art on formal grounds'.<sup>12</sup> Meredith was himself a novelist who advanced the view that fiction could properly be a vehicle for serious thought and consummate artistry but here he is obliged to warn Hardy that, what we can only assume was a somewhat radical novel (in the political and social sense), would not be acceptable for the fiction market. He suggested that Hardy should either 'soften' the book or, better still, write another with a more complex plot. Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone had been something of a success the previous year and in writing his second novel, Desperate Remedies, Hardy took Meredith's advice seriously and produced a work of the Wilkie Collins type with a highly

intricate and involved plot. Sutherland comments rather wryly that Meredith's advice about plot may have been detrimental in the long run:

Do those tremendous, sensational scenes and the creaking plot machineries in the later novels owe something to the hour with Meredith?<sup>13</sup>.

However, Hardy did not succeed in getting a publisher for The Poor Man and the Lady and gave up on that novel altogether; in spite of this he had received advice from, as Sutherland puts it, 'probably the best critics of unpublished fiction in England'.<sup>14</sup>.

Hardy sent the MS. of Desperate Remedies to Macmillan early in 1870 with two chapters still to come. After a month John Morley reported to Macmillan on the novel saying that the plot was inventive, well-constructed and complex, but that it was also impossible. He praised Hardy's style and use of dialogue but added:

....the story is ruined by the disgusting and absurd outrage which is the key to its mystery. The violation of a young lady at an evening party, and the subsequent birth of a child, is too abominable to be tolerated as a central incident from which the action of the story is to move.<sup>15</sup>.

Thus this time on account of its breaking accepted codes of Victorian sexual morality (rather than on account of political and social radicalism) Hardy's second novel was rejected by Macmillan's. Morley's advice to Macmillan about publishing was:

Don't touch this - but beg the writer to discipline himself to keep away from such incidents as violation - and let us see his next story.<sup>16</sup>.



Like much of the advice received by Hardy from figures in the world of publishing and literature, now and later, this piece of advice relates to what will or will not satisfy the reviewers' and reading public's moral scruples rather than to what might be the best way for Hardy to improve in the techniques and methods of fiction writing.

Desperate Remedies was eventually published by Tinsley in March 1871, some three years after Hardy had initially approached Macmillan with his first manuscript. The first notice of the novel appeared in Athenaeum<sup>17</sup>. and, as the novel had been published anonymously, the reviewer spends some time pondering on whether the author is male or female. He criticises its coarseness of expression and finds the story most unpleasant although the plot is considered to show 'considerable artistic power'. Interestingly, even this first review links Hardy with George Eliot - time and time again their works are compared by the reviewers although beyond certain surface similarities they do not have much in common. This reviewer sees the likeness between the two to lie in their character sketches of rural folk. Hardy's parish clerk, particularly, is 'almost worthy of George Eliot'. He also admires Hardy's management of dialect - again an issue upon which subsequent critics disagree, many feeling that the dialect is not close enough to real speech. Hardy's own view of this is set out clearly in a letter written later in his career to The Spectator:

The rule of scrupulously preserving the local idiom, together with the words which have no synonym among those in general use, while printing in the ordinary way most of those local expressions which are but a modified articulation of words in use elsewhere, is

the rule I usually follow; and it is, I believe, generally recognised as the best, where every such rule must of necessity be a compromise, more or less unsatisfactory to lovers of form. It must, of course, be always a matter for regret that, in order to be understood, writers should be obliged thus slightly to treat varieties of English which are intrinsically as genuine, grammatical, and worthy of the royal title as is the all-prevailing competitor which bears it; whose only fault was that they happened not to be central, and therefore were worsted in the struggle for existence, when a uniform tongue became a necessity among the advanced classes of the population.<sup>18</sup>

This first review then, was quite complimentary, apart from the comment about the expression being 'coarse'. It is difficult to make out quite what this coarseness refers to; it sounds like a stylistic criticism but one suspects it has more to do with something disagreeable in the content of the novel. The reviewer urges Hardy to purge himself of this coarseness though he finds it preferable to 'the prurient sentimentality with which we are so often nauseated'. He recognises Hardy's talent as something out of the ordinary even though he does not approve of its manifestations; much the same could be said of the publishers and their readers too.

A review in The Spectator<sup>19</sup>. was almost completely condemnatory. It was this review which Hardy read sitting on a stile on his way home from Dorchester to Higher Bockhampton and commented in The Life that 'the bitterness of that moment was never forgotten; at the time he wished that he were dead'.<sup>20</sup> Hardy says that he admits Desperate Remedies was flawed but that 'there was nothing in the book to call for such castigation'.<sup>21</sup> It was probably the harshly dismissive tone of the opening of The Spectator's review which most upset Hardy. The reviewer

claims that Hardy has done well to remain anonymous or he might in writing this novel have heaped disgrace on his family and friends as well as himself. The novel contains only passions of 'the brute kind', unoriginal characters and a plot that is intricate but quite incredible. A redeeming feature of the 'corrupt body of the tale' are the scenes of country life and the reviewer adds:

The nameless author has, too, one other talent of a remarkable kind - sensitiveness to scenic and atmospheric effects, and to their influence on the mind, and the power of rousing similar sensitiveness in his readers.<sup>22</sup>

The Spectator reviewer quotes extensively from the text and wishes he had room to quote more descriptive passages but his final indictment is clear:

....we have said enough to warn our readers against this book, and, we hope, to urge the author to write far better ones.<sup>23</sup>

Because of The Spectator's bad notice Desperate Remedies sold even more slowly than it had begun. Hardy's friend Horace Moule reviewed the novel more sensitively in The Saturday Review later in the year<sup>24</sup>. but this was too late to affect sales. Moule's reviews of Hardy's early novels (he was later to commit suicide) are among the most perceptive in this period. He claims firstly that Desperate Remedies is 'a remarkable story' and one which is well worth reading and goes on to praise the skilfully constructed plot, the women characters and the vivid natural description in the novel. Moule's reservations are confined to Hardy's tendency to wander off the point and, like George Eliot, to indulge in 'generalised abstractions' - an 'intellectual pastime' he finds

'cumbersome'. This is one of Moule's perceptions - the likeness between Hardy and George Eliot consists less in their mutual interest in portraying rural life than in their introduction of ideas and the habit of philosophising into fiction.

The three reviews just cited were kept by Hardy in his scrapbook, along with a fourth notice from The Morning Post.<sup>25</sup> Here the reviewer spends much space relating the plot but his overall judgement is that the novel is 'eminently a success' and he sees it as being in the vein of Wilkie Collins' fiction. Thus, of four reviews, three had been complimentary about Desperate Remedies but Hardy appears to have been upset about The Spectator's review for some time. In correspondence with Macmillan about Under the Greenwood Tree in 1871 he spends about half of one fairly lengthy letter discussing it.<sup>26</sup> It is also clear from the correspondence that comments made by publishers and reviewers have influenced the form and content of Under the Greenwood Tree:

General reasons have induced me to try my hand on a story wholly of this tone - one reason being some reviews of a late novel of mine. In that story the rustic characters and scenery had very little part, yet to my surprise they were made very much of by the reviews.<sup>27</sup>

Hardy then goes on to quote extensively from the reviews and it was in response to this letter that Macmillan wrote asking for copies of the complete press cuttings.

John Morley reported favourably on the novel:

The work in this story is extremely careful, natural and delicate, and the writer deserves

more than common credit for the pains which he has taken with his style and with the harmony of his construction and treatment.<sup>28</sup>

But, again, Morley does not advise publication because he feels there would not be a large market for Under the Greenwood Tree on account of its being too delicate for most people's tastes. This is, of course, quite the reverse reason for not publishing to those given for The Poor Man and the Lady and Desperate Remedies. It seems to have been somewhat difficult to strike the right note in fiction and win popular approval. According to Stang, few of the major Victorian novelists were considered wholly acceptable on moral grounds at the time of publication. Commenting on the period 1850-1870, he remarks:

Every important novelist of the period.... was attacked, most novelists more than once, for lowering the standard of 'purity' of the English novel.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of his report Morley offers Hardy some concrete advice by suggesting that he would do well:

- (1) To study George Sand's best work.
- (2) To shut his ears to the fooleries of critics, as his letter to you (i.e. Malcolm Macmillan) proves he does not do.
- (3) To beware of letting realism grow out of proportion to his fancy.<sup>30</sup>

Taking the second point first, Hardy could have benefited from this piece of advice but he never did overcome his sensitivity to criticism nor his dislike of critics and reviewers. A good proportion of the passages omitted from The Life by its

editors (F. E. Hardy and J. M. Barrie)<sup>31</sup>. concern critics and criticism and show what amounts to an obsessive vulnerability to their remarks, even though Hardy appears to know rationally that most of the adverse comments are ill-informed.

As for the first point, we now see that rather than being advised to write like Wilkie Collins or being compared with Thackeray or George Eliot, Hardy is being exhorted to study the work of a French writer. Morley gives us some idea of his train of thought by referring to George Sand in another part of the letter:

The writer (i.e. Hardy) is wanting in the fine poetic breath wh gives such a charm to George Sand's work in the same kind.<sup>32</sup>...

Thus we see that studying George Sand's work is linked with Morley's third point which warns Hardy of the tendency to be too realistic. 'Realism' as used by the later Victorians still generally means simply close to people, events or scenery one might come across in everyday life, i.e. credible in a superficial (but nonetheless important) way. Being too realistic means writing like Zola or Tolstoy and touching upon subjects not considered to be properly the province of the novel. Morley does not use realism in quite this sense; he is not so much making a moral judgement as an aesthetic one. George Sand's descriptions of nature, landscape and country life were thought by many Victorians to be breathtakingly beautiful and morally uplifting, almost akin to poetry. As a writer she was often compared with George Eliot and Sidney Colvin's comparison of the two also illuminates Morley's point about Hardy. The comparison

is in George Sand's favour; in her writings, according to Colvin:

every image is conceived in relation to the whole, nothing comes to jar or distract us. In the work of George Eliot, moral and philosophical problems do not clothe themselves, with the same certainty of instinct, in appropriate artistic forms. We have passages of first-rate art side by side with passages of philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

There is a recognition by Colvin of a certain organic wholeness, a poetic strain, in the work of George Sand which is missing in English fiction. Morley obviously thinks Hardy has something of this quality in his writing and does not want him to sacrifice it to 'realism' (social realism and commentary?). That Morley should connect Hardy with George Sand is something of a compliment since his estimation of her was high; he considered her 'simply the loveliest prosewriter that ever lived'<sup>34</sup>. In fact a number of erudite Victorians estimated her writing very highly; Patricia Thomson in her book, George Sand and the Victorians argues for her having a substantial, though now largely forgotten, influence. Certainly Thomson's evidence would suggest that writers like Arnold, James and Ruskin, as well as a host of other lesser known literary figures, were devoted to her work. While there is no evidence to suggest that Hardy was influenced by her, he was almost certainly familiar with her novels and Thomson believes there are affinities between the two:

Both writers convey an emotional reciprocity between man and nature which is totally different from anything found in the pages of George Eliot.<sup>35</sup>

What marks Hardy off from Eliot and brings him closer to Sand is, according to Thomson, his portrayal of nature as mysterious,

fatalistic and primitive. George Eliot's landscapes and country folk have none of that magic and atmosphere. Her own comment, 'I am always made happier by seeing well cultivated land',<sup>36</sup> could equally apply to her novels.

Malcolm Macmillan wrote to Hardy on September 11, 1871 enclosing a copy of Morley's report and suggesting that they might be interested in publishing the novel, but nothing ever came of it and the novel was eventually published by Tinsley in May 1872. The reviewers were positively enthusiastic about the novel, the general view being summed up by the reviewer in Athenaeum when he commented that the author, 'has worked principally that vein of his genius which yields the best produce.'<sup>37</sup> In other words, the reviewers approved of Hardy's sticking to innocent portraits of rural life, one in particular commending Hardy for producing a work 'wholly free from coarseness'. This same reviewer also adds:

If it had not been for George Eliot's works, we should not, we are inclined to think, have had Under The Greenwood Tree.<sup>38</sup>

He bases his comparison of the two authors upon the similarity of 'the village talk' in Under the Greenwood Tree and Adam Bede, stressing that the comparison does not mean to imply that Hardy's work is in any way second-rate.

Hardy's descriptive powers receive much praise, not least from Moule, reviewing the novel for The Saturday:

This novel is the best prose idyl that we have seen for a long while past.<sup>39</sup>



Moule's calling it a 'prose idyll' again suggests that Hardy appeared to some of his more discerning contemporaries as a novelist aiming at something more than a realistic portrayal of life in the country. The poetry of his presentation of rustic existence is suggested by the term 'idyl' with its roots in the pastoral tradition. Such a description of Under the Greenwood Tree also calls to mind again the comparison with George Sand since both appear to be blending the pastoral with actual rural life in their works - the timeless ideal of retreat with the tensions of contemporary life. Moule singles out the carol-singing scene and one or two others for especial praise but disapproves of the handling of dialogue in the novel, feeling that the rustics tend to 'express themselves in the language of the author's manner of thought, rather than their own'.<sup>40</sup> This is echoed by The Athenaeum reviewer's comment:

....there is the tendency of the author to forget his part....and to make his characters now and then drop their personality, and speak too much like educated people.<sup>41</sup>

The reviewer in The Pall Mall Gazette too makes a similar comment:

The humble heroes and heroines of the tale are much too shrewd, and say too many good things, to be truthful representatives of their prototypes in real life.<sup>42</sup>

The interesting features of the reviews of Under the Greenwood Tree are that the George Eliot comparison is continued; that Hardy is seen (at least by Moule) as an 'idealist' rather than a 'realist' and, that Hardy is accused of putting his own words into the rustics' mouths. One would have expected that Moule might have been able to appreciate the rustics' role as a kind of

chorus commenting on the main action but there is no recognition of this. Clearly the analogy between the novel and poetic (or even dramatic) forms does not extend to the characters. The same applies to conceptions of probability in relation to the plot - as with Desperate Remedies and the comments about the plot's 'impossibility'. Naturally, the characters and the plot must be convincing but the Victorian reviewers and critics tend to judge this almost exclusively in terms of conformity to the patterns and habits of everyday experience rather than conformity to the patterns set up in the world of the text. There is little comprehension of the novel as an artistic construction.

The reviews of Hardy's next novel, A Pair of Blue Eyes, (1873) were again complimentary about his skill in describing natural scenery and in delineating rural society; in this he is compared with both George Eliot and Walter Scott. The reviewers also recognised the originality of the now famous scene in Chapter 22, where Knight hangs suspended between life and death on the cliff, dramatically confronting evolution by staring at some fossils, and is rescued by Elfride making a rope from her petticoats. There is a vague recognition that this scene is more than a straightforward description. Moule, for instance thinks that this and a number of the rural scenes 'recall the intense minuteness and vivid concentration of the most powerful among the French writers of fiction',<sup>43</sup> emphasising again the difference between Hardy's art and that of the typically English realistic novel. Moule must have had in mind writers like George Sand or Flaubert whose works differ so markedly from the English novelist's craft. Other reviewers also note the poetic tendency of the novel. The reviewer in The Spectator, for example, finds

it 'a really powerful story' which shows:

....a poet's sympathy with the human passion when turned to its sweetest or saddest notes, and an artist's eye for every aspect of nature.<sup>44</sup>

But again it is Moule who expresses most succinctly the particular quality of the novel, claiming 'that out of simple materials there has been evolved a result of really tragic power' and in this finding new grounds for comparing George Eliot and Hardy:

By some of his former critics Mr. Hardy has been unwisely compared with George Eliot. In reality, no two writers could be more unlike in their general methods. But in one respect there is a decided resemblance - namely, that Mr. Hardy has in the book before us developed, with something of the ruthlessness of George Eliot, what may be called the tragedy of circumstance, the power of mere events on certain kinds of character.<sup>45</sup>

Here Moule is recognising an important aspect of Hardy's fiction - the operation of events and the workings of fate on individuals, with tragic results. Linking Hardy with George Eliot in this respect is more fruitful in terms of their innovations as novelists than comparing them as delineators of rural manners and customs.

A Pair of Blue Eyes was much admired by certain of Hardy's contemporaries and was well-received by the reviewers.

Tennyson and Coventry Patmore - both poets - thought it a fine novel and it is significant that Proust, a well-known admirer of Hardy, and a figure foremost in the movement away from French naturalism, should have shown an interest in Hardy's method.

In the passage in À la Recherche du Temps Perdu where he discusses A Pair of Blue Eyes and The Well-Beloved, Proust shows that he recognises a structuring and shaping of form and content which penetrates beyond surface realism and logic. He writes, for instance, of Hardy's 'stonemason's geometry' as part of this shaping, and also of the 'parallelism' in the novels:

Do you remember the stonemasons in Jude the Obscure, and The Well-Beloved, the blocks of stone which the father hews out of the island coming in boats to be piled up in the son's studio where they are turned into statues; in A Pair of Blue Eyes the parallelism of the tombs, and also the parallel line of the vessel, and the railway coaches containing the lovers and the dead woman; the parallelism between The Well-Beloved where the man is in love with three women, and A Pair of Blue Eyes where the woman is in love with three men, and in short all those novels which can be laid one upon another like the vertically piled houses upon the rocky soil of the island.<sup>46</sup>.

Almost the only adverse criticism of the novel came from Moule who notes Hardy's use of 'cumbersome words, like synthetized and filamentous, where simpler ones would have served the purpose.'<sup>47</sup>. Hardy's contemporaries thought more highly of the novel than their counterparts in the twentieth century have done, although it is generally held to be the most interesting of the so-called 'minor' novels.<sup>48</sup>.

Far From the Madding Crowd was the first of Hardy's novels to be extensively reviewed and established him as a leading novelist in much the same way that Adam Bede (to which it was compared) had established George Eliot's reputation twenty-five years earlier. The final form of the novel owes much to the efforts of Leslie Stephen who kept a strict editorial eye on the novel

while it was being serialised in The Cornhill. What evidence there is of the correspondence between Hardy and Stephen testifies to this.<sup>49</sup> Stephen is constantly suggesting that Hardy should shorten this or that scene or organise his material more effectively. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Stephen dictated matters to Hardy; all his letters are helpful and encouraging. In turn, Hardy was keen to oblige Stephen and do what was necessary to become a popular novelist. He tells us in The Life that he wrote to Stephen:

Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial.<sup>50</sup>

This can, and often has, been taken to mean that, in Jamesian terms, Hardy in some way 'betrayed a sacred office' but when it is viewed in its proper context it emerges in its true sense - as the modest comment of a relatively inexperienced novelist, unsure of himself and wishing to please a noted literary figure whom he much admired. In The Life Hardy acknowledges his debt to Stephen as a thinker but it must also be said that, as with the other literary men he had had dealings with, he also owed him much as an editor and critic.

Most notable in the correspondence is Stephen's kindness towards Hardy which seems to have given him new confidence in his abilities. Typical comments from Stephen are as follows:

....it is long since I have received more pleasure from a new writer.<sup>51</sup>

....several good judges have spoken to me very warmly of the Madding Crowd.<sup>52</sup>

The story improves as it goes on and I hear nothing but good of it.<sup>53</sup>

and in reply to Hardy's apprehensions about the novel's reception:

....you need not be afraid of such criticisms. You are original and can stand on your own legs.<sup>54</sup>

You have, I am sure, no cause to be nervous about the book in any way.<sup>55</sup>

If any were needed, these comments are further proof of the attention and encouragement given to Hardy as a young writer and the measure of understanding of his work. This is quite a different picture from the one we tend to hold of Hardy as a misunderstood and much-abused figure struggling against the might of Victorian opinion - a picture built up from his own comments and from the notoriety of the reception of Jude the Obscure.

The reviews of Far From the Madding Crowd were varied in opinion and uneven in quality but it would be fair to say that the novel was well received. From the start the comparison between Hardy and George Eliot formed the staple of the reviews; after the first instalment had appeared in The Cornhill, The Spectator's reviewer wrote:

If Far From the Madding Crowd is not written

by George Eliot, then there is a new light among novelists.<sup>56</sup>

This was a promising start but still in correspondence with Stephen, Hardy worried about being thought a mere imitator of George Eliot. When the novel appeared in book form almost every reviewer felt bound to allude to the comparison and to discuss their relative merits. The Westminster Review made a large claim:

Far From the Madding Crowd stands to all contemporary novels precisely as Adam Bede did to all other novels some sixteen years ago.<sup>57</sup>

In retrospect this is an important issue since Hardy is not being seen as George Eliot's imitator but as her successor as a serious and worthwhile novelist. R. H. Hutton's view in The Spectator is that Hardy's rustics are too eccentric and shrewd; like critics of Under the Greenwood Tree he thinks they speak in terms of the author's intellect rather than their own. Hutton, a great admirer of George Eliot, uses this as a point of comparison with her treatment of rustic characters:

....George Eliot never confuses her own ideas with those of her dramatic figures, as Mr. Hardy seems to us so often to do.<sup>58</sup>

Most reviewers, following Hutton, make similar criticisms of the rustics, likening Hardy's treatment to that of George Eliot but most finding the performance decidedly less impressive. The reviewer for The Saturday finds the rustics' capacity for philosophising most unreal; he says neither Shakespeare, Scott,

nor George Eliot make their countryfolk 'rise to anything like the flights of abstract reasoning with which Mr. Hardy credits his cider-drinking boors'.<sup>59</sup> Henry James, reviewing Far From the Madding Crowd for Nation, considers Hardy to be an imitator of George Eliot. Like her, Hardy has chosen to write about 'ale-house and kitchen-fire conversations among simple-minded rustics',<sup>60</sup> but where her talent is original, his is definitely of the second order. James is not very explicit about why Hardy's rustic dialogue is inferior to George Eliot's, he is content to assert that Hardy's talent is imitative and to go on from there to develop this assertion. Having quoted from the scene at Warren's Malthouse he comments:

....the author has evidently read to good purpose the low-life chapters in George Eliot's novels; he has caught very happily her trick of seeming to humour benignantly her queer people and look down at them from the heights of analytic omniscience.<sup>61</sup>

James adds that the scene has 'a rather promising air of life and warmth' and goes on:

But by critics who prefer a grain of substance to a pound of shadow it will, we think, be pronounced a decidedly delusive performance; it has a fatal lack of magic.<sup>62</sup>

We may assume from this that James thinks Hardy's rustic dialogue lacks reality and 'magic' because Hardy is writing for the market-place whereas George Eliot is perceived by him to have artistic integrity as well as a claim upon originality. One might have expected from James, even so early in his career, at least a glimpse of Hardy's talent but all he can do is praise



rather mildly Hardy's ability to convey 'a certain aroma of the meadows and lanes - a natural relish for the harvestings and sheep-washings'.<sup>63</sup> James's final verdict on Far From the Madding Crowd is this:

Everything human in the book strikes us as factitious and insubstantial; the only things we believe in are the sheep and the dogs. But, as we say, Mr. Hardy has gone astray very cleverly, and his superficial novel is a really curious imitation of something better.<sup>64</sup>

Clearly James does not appreciate Hardy's methods of characterisation any more than do most other Victorian reviewers; he considers Troy 'stagey', Boldwood 'a mere shadow' and Bathsheba is described as 'a young lady of the inconsequential, wilful, mettlesome type which has become so much the fashion for heroines'. Here again, James is suggesting that Hardy's novel has been written to please the public and to be fashionable rather than as a serious artistic enterprise; he completely fails to understand Hardy's art and, in addition, adopts a dismissive and patronising tone which is most unpleasant. As John Bayley comments:

Like most great creators Henry James was incapable of extending critical sympathy to a method so far from his own.....his review of Far From the Madding Crowd shows not the faintest awareness of its genius. <sup>65</sup>.

Hardy himself was not particularly appreciative of James's fictional method either; a comment of his from 1888, recorded in The Life, highlights their differences:

Reading H. James's Reverberator. After this kind of work one feels inclined to be purposely careless in detail. The great novels of the future will certainly not concern themselves with the minutiae of manners....James's subjects are those one could be interested in at moments when there is nothing larger to think of.<sup>66</sup>

Another influential reviewer, Andrew Lang, writing the first of several reviews of Hardy's novels in Academy, accuses Hardy of being patronising in his authorial tone:

The author is telling clever people about unlettered people, and he adopts a sort of patronising voice, in which there are echoes, now of George Eliot, and now of George Meredith.<sup>67</sup>

He is equally critical of the rustics' manner of speech;

Odd scraps of <sup>a kind of</sup> rural euphemism, misapplications of scripture, and fragments of modern mechanical wit, are stirred up into a queer mixture.<sup>68</sup>

Lang thinks that Hardy's tone and his attitude to the rustics which link him with Meredith and Eliot are exactly what prevents his work being compared with George Sand's; she does not philosophise about her rustics or patronise them but presents them to us in scenes 'exquisitely quiet and harmonious'. However, Lang concludes that Far From the Madding Crowd is 'an interesting, provoking, and clever story' and, like most other critics of the novel he admires the descriptions of the countryside, describing them as 'nearly perfect, and worthy of all praise.'

Lang's references to Meredith and Eliot once again place Hardy in

association with the intellectual and serious novelists of the period. Meredith particularly was, later in the decade, associated with the cause of gaining the novel's acceptance as a valid art form and a vehicle for serious discussion. According to Graham, from 1879 when The Egoist was published and two articles appeared in The Saturday and The British Quarterly on Meredith's work, attitudes to the novel completely changed. He calls it (perhaps rather exaggeratedly) 'one of the major revolutions of Victorian criticism' and continues:

From this time on, 'seriousness' and 'thought' become the key-words in the aims of a whole new generation of novelists and critics - the heirs, it is often said, to a movement that George Eliot had begun.<sup>69</sup>

Graham cites Meredith, Hardy, Moore and Gissing as members of this new generation but feels that Hardy sits uneasily in the company of these novelists who were all more articulate and intellectual campaigners for the novel's status and freedom than he ever was. Arguably they are all also, except Hardy, better theorists than they are novelists; with Hardy his art came first and the theories tend to be built around what appears to have been a fairly instinctive method.

Although Hardy's early critics did not really understand his methods of characterisation nor appreciate that he was writing a different kind of fiction from that of the earlier Victorian novelists, it would be wrong to think that they did not see some merit in Far From the Madding Crowd. There was almost universal praise for the beauty and brilliance of the natural description in the novel. As we have seen, Lang had a high opinion of this aspect

of Hardy's art, and even James, amidst a typically Jamesian tirade against the length of Victorian novels, finds room to say that he would not wish Far From the Madding Crowd any shorter if it meant cutting out any of the descriptions of nature. Lang also likens the rural scene in Weatherbury to similar scenes Chaucer and Shakespeare might have watched; it is a pity he is unable to appreciate that the characters as well as the scenes in this rural community are perhaps meant to be timeless and choric in function. Both The Guardian and The Times describe the novel as 'a pastoral idyll' and The Times reviewer, F. N. Broome, praises its poetic qualities, feeling that Hardy possesses:

....a certain vein of original thought and a delicate perceptive faculty, which transforms, with skilful touch, the matter-of-fact prosaic details of everyday life into an idyl or pastoral poem.<sup>70</sup>

In such comments we see, as in Moule's reference to Under the Greenwood Tree as a 'prose idyll', recognition that Hardy is attempting more in his novels than a close picture of real life in the country. The setting and the description of nature are appreciated for their poetic resonances, their emblematic quality; it is in the characters and the story that the Victorian reviewers expect probability.

On the evidence of this first phase of Hardy criticism, it would not be unreasonable to say that the main lines of Hardy criticism have already been drawn, although the critical response to Tess (1891) and Jude (1896) shows Hardy's supposed radicalism coming to the fore as a topic for discussion in the reviews.

Attitudes to the rustics and in particular to their dialogue are still mixed, as are attitudes to Hardy's language and style as a whole. James articulates the feelings of most reviewers when he describes the language of Far From the Madding Crowd as 'ingeniously verbose and redundant'; many of today's critics would concur with that estimate - as we shall observe. The complaints about Hardy's habit of philosophising still continue, and the now more developed conception of him as a poet-novelist was certainly begun by his contemporaries. They also realise that Hardy is a serious novelist and perhaps a tragic one but are not always sure that the novel is the arena for such efforts. Many of the difficulties the Victorian reviewers faced with Hardy's fiction arose because their expectations of the novel were rather narrow, rather confined to what was life-like; Graham summarises their expectations thus:

Truth to human nature is one of the most widespread and durable critical principles of the age. 'Not true-to-life', 'blurred', 'indistinct', and 'caricatures' are perpetually recurrent phrases of condemnation; and 'mixed' or 'well-rounded' characters become a reviewers' fetish.<sup>71</sup>

## (II) The Establishment of Hardy's Reputation

The seven novels which follow Far From the Madding Crowd, written in the period between 1874 and the publication of Tess in 1891, are very variable in quality and the reviewers' reception of them does not always accord with our own estimation of them. For instance, The Hand of Ethelberta, the successor to Far From the Madding Crowd, was quite well received whereas modern opinion has until recently held it to be, in the words of Robert Gittings,

'the joker in the pack'.<sup>72</sup> Hardy though, while calling this novel of his 'frivolous' in the 1895 preface, becomes quite defensive about it in the 1912 preface:

Imaginary circumstances that on its first publication were deemed eccentric and almost impossible are now paralleled on the stage and in novels, and accepted as reasonable and interesting pictures of life; which suggests that the comedy (or more accurately, satire) - issued in April 1876 - appeared thirty-five years too soon.<sup>73</sup>

Richard H. Taylor's The Neglected Hardy (1982), while not making great claims for the novel's status, rather questions Gittings' views. Taylor thinks we have misunderstood The Hand of Ethelberta and that it should be read as a social satire, satirising not only the conventions of the time but also the accepted forms of fiction. He also thinks (as did D. H. Lawrence) that Ethelberta herself is a fascinating heroine.

Although the novel did not attract much comment from the reviewers on its publication, it was certainly not a great flop; in fact the reviewer in The Spectator claimed that 'a more entertaining book than The Hand of Ethelberta has not been published for many a year', and called it 'a lively satire on social falsehoods'.<sup>74</sup> The Westminster Review's notice of the book followed one of Daniel Deronda and the reviewer makes a point of saying that the two novels are equally good, declaring that The Hand of Ethelberta 'will sustain Mr. Hardy's reputation'.<sup>75</sup> Academy too gave the book a good notice with their reviewer, George Saintsbury, taking the view that the novel was an improvement on Far From the Madding Crowd which had showed too much 'topsy-turvification' of thought.<sup>76</sup>

Only The Saturday Review<sup>77</sup>. came close to what was to become the accepted 20th Century view in thinking that both Ethelberta herself and the plot of the novel were highly irritating and improbable. Hardy's talents, says the reviewer, are being misapplied for he could have a place 'in the first rank of novelists' if he would stick to observing nature and country life and make more of his tragic sense. Both approaches to the novel are right in a sense; as a light 'read' or on account of its relevance to Hardy's oeuvre as a whole, The Hand of Ethelberta is interesting and has the added merit of incidents and descriptions of startling originality but, by comparison with the best of Hardy's novels, it is weak.

The Return of the Native, published in 1878, had a more controversial reception than Ethelberta because of its being an altogether more serious and experimental novel. It was refused by Leslie Stephen for The Cornhill on grounds of its subject matter being unsuitable for his readers but a bowdlerised version eventually appeared in Belgravia. Some reviewers disapproved of the novel for one reason or another but by and large there is recognition of its artistic merits. There is some carping about the rustics' speech and about the predominance of low class characters in Hardy's novels; there is also a fair amount of adverse criticism of Eustacia Vye (as of many of Hardy's heroines) on account of her self-centred and passionate nature but this is hardly a fair assessment of her merit as a fictional creation. The Athenaeum reviewer<sup>78</sup>. accuses Hardy of failing in his attempt to imitate Mme. Bovary in Eustacia and other reviewers too relate the novel to French fiction, thereby showing that they realise Hardy is attempting something different from

the social and realistic novels of the period. W. E. Henley, for example, reviewing The Return of the Native for Academy remarks that he finds this novel inferior to A Pair of Blue Eyes and describes it as, '....all very mournful, and very cruel, and very French....'<sup>79</sup>. By this he appears to mean that the novel is cold and intellectual; he notes the absence of either laughter or tears and considers Clym a failure as a tragic figure apart from odd moments when he rises to the occasion. Henley's assessment of Eustacia is made on the basis of her success as a fictional creation - a welcome change from moral criteria-and he is full of praise for Hardy's achievement:

....he seems to me to paint the woman and the place as no other living writer could have done. <sup>80</sup>.

The analytical and self-conscious style of The Return of the Native which so impresses Henley, fails to impress the reviewer in The Saturday who is clearly opposed to the serious and the philosophical in fiction. Hardy, he says, tries to be clever when he ought to be entertaining:

We maintain that the primary object of a story is to amuse, and in the attempt to amuse us Mr. Hardy, in our opinion, breaks down. <sup>81</sup>.

This attitude to fiction is the one we most readily associate with the Victorians and the one which many modern critics tend to emphasise, although by the later part of the century it is actually, as stated in its baldest form like this, the exception rather than the rule. For this reviewer The Return of the Native fails to entertain because it is not realistic;



Hardy strains too much for originality and indulges in eccentricities of expression which appear to irritate the reviewer.

The Spectator's reviewer takes up the issue of tragedy in the novel, claiming, like Henley, that this is an inappropriate label. However, this reviewer goes further in suggesting that the novel is fatalistic and is the first to link this fatalism (or pessimism) with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. He thinks Hardy has a considerable debt to Schopenhauer, and, though Hardy himself strenuously denied this all his life and was very annoyed by it, many critics were to pursue the issue. The reviewer obviously finds the determinism of The Return of the Native most depressing; he speaks of:

....a peculiar imaginative mood - a mood in which there seems to be no room for freedom.... only the ups and downs of a dark necessity, in which men play the parts of mere offsprings of the physical universe, and are governed by forces and tides no less inscrutable. 82.

Again we see Hardy being associated with current intellectual movements; he is not only believed to be a follower of Schopenhauer's philosophy but is also an adherent of scientific determinism - the implication being that he is very much a man of his times, keeping abreast of all the developments in science, philosophy and so on. Mid-twentieth century critics, particularly, went to the opposite extreme and saw no value in his philosophy of life - if indeed he had one. Guerard in Thomas Hardy, The Novels and Stories, (1949) remarks that 'the commonplaces of his thought struggled persistently with his dramatic and poetic talent'<sup>83</sup>. and Arnold Kettle, writing in the 1960's says

'....there is no doubt that this conscious philosophy affects the book (i.e. Tess) for the worse'.<sup>84</sup>

Late in 1879, well after the publication of The Return of the Native, The New Quarterly surveyed Hardy's work to date, noting particularly the 'sensation' which Far From the Madding Crowd had produced amongst the novel-reading public. However, the reviewer is quite sure that Hardy's success will not be ephemeral because he is an original writer whose overall achievement has been the result of sustained and genuine inspiration:

....he not only cannot be compared with other writers, but cannot be classified under any known formula of literary art.<sup>85</sup>

The novels are praised for being dramatic without being sensational and for being minutely worked out yet giving the impression of wide and general emotional qualities. This survey makes no mention of Hardy's pessimism or determinism other than a mention of Hardy believing in a moral order to which human action is subject. The characters Hardy portrays in his novels are also applauded - the women characters for their combination of strength and femininity and the typical men (i.e. Gabriel Oak and Diggory Venn) for their stoicism. The Return of the Native is noted as a new departure in Hardy's work, being more serious, self-conscious and highly motivated. In the light of this the reviewer poses the question: 'imagination and intellect are fighting for mastery in Mr. Hardy's work. Which will prevail?'<sup>86</sup>. This is not a first-class piece of criticism by any means; the writer is too vague about the nature of Hardy's originality and does not view his success in relation to other novelists or

to ideas which may have influenced him, but the survey is worth mentioning because it illustrates further that Hardy was well received by many of the reviewers and was recognised as a major new talent.

Hardy's next five novels, that is all those between The Return and Tess, received reasonable if uninspired reviews, though there was some disapproval of the 'disagreeable' characters and events portrayed in The Woodlanders. Surprisingly perhaps to us, The Mayor of Casterbridge attracted little attention from most critics and seems to have been thought quite an inferior production. The important thing to emerge during these years is a more general impression of Hardy's work as a whole and his contribution to the art of the novel. A review of The Trumpet Major provides the opportunity for one reviewer to remark of Hardy's work:

Mr. Hardy seems to be in the way to do for rural life what Dickens did for that of the town. Like the elder novelist, he finds his characters entirely in the middle or lower middle class. 87.

The comparison with Dickens marks a dawning realisation that Wessex is a fictional universe, in much the same way as Dickens' London, with ordinary folk who are actually seen to work for a living. In this way Hardy's fiction can be seen as something other than pleasant pictures of rural life and nature interspersed with a bit of philosophy. It also means that this reviewer, at least, recognises that Hardy belongs to a more 'popular' tradition quite distinct from that of the intellectual novel of the later nineteenth century as exemplified by the work of Moore, Meredith and Gissing. The reviewer does not enlarge upon

his observation to any degree but he is the first to draw attention to the points of likeness between Hardy and Dickens.

A second survey of Hardy's novels appeared in The British Quarterly Review in 1881. In this account we return to the Hardy who is the worthy successor of George Eliot as greatest living English novelist. The critic thinks the title is well-deserved because Hardy is able, like George Eliot, to create characters whom one assimilates and remembers long after the novel is finished. This seems a flimsy argument as the same could surely be said of the characters of Dickens, or Thackeray or even Trollope but the point is that Hardy is being hailed as a great writer. Hardy's literary style is contrasted with that of George Meredith which is considered laboured and affected. Other points made in this survey include a first reference to the amount of autobiographical material Hardy uses in his novels and a defence of the dialect on the premise that the average reader would be unable to read pure dialect - an obvious point made by Hardy himself and one which reviewers seem to have missed so far. The survey shows perception about Hardy's dramatisation of nature in the novels:

In all his books, without any effort, Mr. Hardy brings in nature as a personality, now aiding, now at war with man, now subdued, now triumphant, but always as living and in relation to human life. 88.

This view of nature as personality is based largely on the critic's reading of The Return of the Native which he considers to be Hardy's greatest achievement and one which he is unlikely to surpass. Hardy's portrayal of country life is also praised for its realism and is contrasted with the falseness of the

picture shown in Charlotte Yonge's novels where country life is all clergy and high teas. There seem to be various opinions about the realism of Hardy's rural community in the novels; most critics find it idealised but there are others, like this critic, who draw attention to its realism. Such differences of opinion draw attention to the confusion about what was expected from a novel and how far it should reflect surface reality.

As Hardy's novels continued to appear more stress was laid upon their tendency to be gloomy and also upon Hardy's indulgence (as it was seen) in dull analysis and abstraction. Most journals ignored A Laodicean and Two on a Tower but the reviews which did appear were not condemnatory though they are uninspired in content. The most important development at this time was the increase in the number of general surveys of Hardy's work. Coventry Patmore used a review of The Woodlanders as an opportunity to discuss Hardy's overall literary achievement in St. James's Gazette<sup>89</sup> in 1887. He remarks firstly on the transitoriness of the mass of nineteenth century fiction and declares that Hardy's fiction is above the mass - its value to posterity will lie in his depiction of the manners of the humblest and simplest classes. Patmore estimates Hardy's novels highly for he judges him to be the greatest living novelist and says also that he is wasting his powers by writing prose rather than poetry. Hardy's love of nature is passionate and observant and, in Patmore's view, he interprets rural manners more faithfully and lovingly than even George Eliot in Silas Marner. The only parallel to Hardy's work is to be found in the poems of the Dorset writer William Barnes, a friend of Hardy's and much-admired by him. Patmore adds:

No poet has ever discerned more acutely or expressed more forcibly, tenderly, and daintily the inexhaustible beauties of wood, heath, field and lane; and yet he is so good an artist that nature always keeps its place in his writings as the unobtrusive background of a humanity full of the most breathing life and interest, though, for the most part, as unsophisticated as nature itself. 90.

Thus Patmore stresses the importance of the poetry of Hardy's novels in assuring him a high ranking among English novelists in the future. He writes also of the pathos and tragedy of the novels, linking this with Hardy's close observation of character as well as the natural environment. As the above quotation shows, Patmore sees how closely knit the fates of Hardy's characters are with the environment he describes. Patmore is also perceptive in realising and commenting on the originality of Hardy's women characters:

It is in his heroines, however, that Hardy is most original and delightful. The central female figures...have never made their appearance in any other story; and yet each has the charm of the simplest and most familiar womanhood, and the only character they have in common is that of having each some serious defect, which only makes us like them more. 91.

He sees that Hardy's heroines are more akin to flesh and blood women than to the idealised creations of much Victorian fiction and yet he also sees that Hardy makes them in a sense greater because of the tragedy arising from their flawed characters.

Patmore's criticism of Hardy's fiction is particularly sensitive and sympathetic to his imaginative powers, which were, after all, different from those manifested by other nineteenth century novelists.

Most importantly Patmore is less hide-bound by convention than most of the critics and reviewers and is therefore more able to judge the novels on aesthetic grounds rather than moral ones. His recognition of Hardy's skill in creating tragedy from his depiction of characters in humble stations of life is quite clearly expressed here whereas most others had only vaguely seen that this was what Hardy was attempting and had described his skill equally vaguely as 'powerful' or 'vigorous' or, if they objected to the content, as 'coarse'.

However, Patmore's brief survey was only one of several to appear in the 1880's, before the publication of Tess and Jude;

J. M. Barrie also contributed an article on Hardy for Contemporary Review, entitled Thomas Hardy: the Historian of Wessex.<sup>92</sup> Barrie considers Hardy to be a talented storyteller, particularly because he does not intervene in his stories, destroying the illusion. Barrie thus shows himself to be of the Jamesian school and would surely have agreed with James that authorial intervention is 'the betrayal of a sacred office'. Hardy is not usually commended for his lack of intrusion for although he does not actually address the reader directly (as Thackeray does, for instance) he does often digress into generalisations and abstractions. Barrie obviously does not find this an obstacle to enjoyment of the story. Barrie also admires Hardy because he is a novelist who has something to say - except, that is, when he moves the sphere of action outside Wessex. Even more than George Eliot, Barrie feels, Hardy has been influenced by the scenes of his youth and it is only when concentrating on what he most loves and knows that he is a first class writer.

Barrie admits that Hardy has critics 'whom he seems to vex' but he is not one of them and points to Hardy's talent for depicting 'the tragedy of humanity' likening the endings of some of his novels to those of Shakespearian tragedy. The philosophical side of his art is an enhancement of the overall intention and effect:

Mr. Hardy's sad philosophy rings as true as his English yeomen or his picture of Egdon Heath, and he ignores the childish repugnance to 'unhappy endings', like one who thinks that the art of storytelling may aim higher than to rest the brain of Darwins or Ruskins when they are tired of thinking. Fiction is not necessarily a substitute for marbles. 93.

So Hardy's seriousness of purpose and his large conception of the novel's role are appreciated by Barrie as being supremely important to the development of that genre. Hardy's philosophy is a kind of prophecy:

It is only a philosophy come to him a little before its time, a grand philosophy of the future towards which the world is shaping. 94.

Barrie shows by this comment that he understands the mind and purpose of Hardy the writer (he was a personal friend of Hardy's), the attraction which evolutionary ideas had for him and how his pessimism and fatalism blend into his conception of evolution. Yet, Barrie says, Hardy's novels are realistic in their portrayal of country life, more real than the usual two extremes of an over-sentimental or an over-cruel view:

Among English novelists of today he is the only realist to be considered, so far as life in country parts is concerned. 95.



Unlike some other critics of the period, Barrie does not find realism of detail to be at odds with the poetic qualities of the fiction; his view of fiction is, like Patmore's, more all-encompassing than the view which sees novels as modes of relaxation and entertainment or which condemns them to being mirrors of everyday life. He complains that the rustics speak too cleverly - 'It is not the realism that gives Mr. Hardy's rural figures a chance of living on' - but at least has the perception to realise that the rustics are not necessarily failures just because they say clever things and are not in this very basic sense 'realistic.'

Knowing Hardy's intention and outlook as he did, Barrie was in a good position to interpret and comment on his fiction, but we should remember that the two men were very different in character and views and that Barrie has set aside his prejudices and extended his sympathies to a writer who manifested a very different genius from that which he possessed. Like Patmore, he was himself a creative writer, and the excellence of their criticism, by comparison with the standard of the reviews, adds weight to the assertion that the best critics of other people's work as well as possibly the worst,<sup>96</sup> are those who possess some talent and imagination themselves.

Edmund Gosse's survey on Hardy in The Speaker also shows insight in its ability to look at Hardy's novels as part of a larger framework of recent fictional developments. So far as Gosse is concerned, Hardy is to be compared with Meredith because,

Neither has the great novel-reading public

with him, each enlists the bulk of his readers from the class of adult male persons, and each is the peculiar favourite, in his own generation, of the literary and critical minority. 97.

Here again we are given a picture of Hardy as an intellectual novelist, a serious writer and man of ideas. Gosse defends Hardy's peasantry as realistic from the point of view of one who knows Wessex well; he asserts that Hardy's studies are based on truthful observation. Aesthetically this is a somewhat irrelevant point since the illusion of reality is all that is necessary in the fictional world. However, it does to some extent answer the criticisms of those who, in their ignorance, felt that such simple souls as Hardy's peasants could not possibly exist anywhere in England.

More importantly, Gosse notes:

....there is something in his conception of feminine character which is not well received. 98.

What he calls Hardy's 'feminine realism' does not appeal to those who have been brought up on a literary diet of demure and romantic heroines. Bathsheba, Eustacia, Felice Charmond and company, are not typical Victorian heroines, they are strong-willed and dignified and....

All are women lifted by circumstances a little distance out of their sphere - educated too highly for it, rendered too fine for it, yet excluded from a superior status, which they are too simple to succeed in reaching. 99.

Increasingly it seems to dawn on Hardy's Victorian critics that his heroines are complex creations who break the mould so far as heroines in Victorian novels are concerned, and cannot be summed up in a few phrases. Havelock Ellis in his article in The Westminster Review<sup>100</sup>. is more interested in the psychology of Hardy's women characters than their social status. Ellis's article is lengthy but extremely perceptive; John Bayley has said of it that it is:

....the most searching and sensitive essay ever written on Hardy. The more so because it neither praises the novels in the conventional way, nor makes what had come to be the equally conventional attack on their vices.<sup>101</sup>.

Ellis is of the opinion that Hardy's heroines are important in entitling him to his high position among novelists. He puts it this way:

Mr. Hardy's way of regarding women is peculiar and difficult to define, not because it is not a perfectly defensible way, but because it is in a great degree new.<sup>102</sup>.

Hardy's heroines are strong but have not the directness and power to change the course of events that a Shirley or a Dorothea Brooke have; they are swayed by circumstances and are inextricably bound up with their environment and the pull of forces around them:

One feels compelled to insist on the instinctiveness of these women. There is, in truth, something elemental, something demonic about them. We see at once that they have no souls.<sup>103</sup>.

Ellis then makes his point clear by reference to Charlotte Bronte's and George Eliot's heroines, all of whom in their various ways have to work out their moral position, usually choosing between passion and duty. No such moral nuances enter the lives of Hardy's characters - male or female; as Ellis points out, Hardy is not concerned with 'the bearing of moral problems on human action', his interest is in a wider sphere where individual moral choice has little effect on outcome, except perhaps as the spark igniting a tragic flame. Furthermore, Ellis notes the fact that Hardy's characters never develop or change as they do in most Victorian novels, this too he sees as the source of much tragedy.

This criticism of Ellis's is very close and detailed; I have given only the gist of the argument but suffice it to say that its intelligence and depth make it wholly convincing. Ellis's remarks on Hardy's peasants are also apt as a reply to the monotonous chorus of criticisms about their clever speech and philosophical bent. He maintains that Hardy's rustics are closer to Shakespeare's clowns in Hamlet and A Winter's Tale than they are to George Eliot's peasants who, as he rightly points out, are sketchy figures at best and remain much more in the background than do Hardy's. Like Patmore, Barrie, and Gosse, Havelock Ellis is most impressed with Hardy's originality, his freshness of vision in looking at Nature and life as a whole:

It is largely on account of this quality -  
this freshness of insight into certain  
aspects of nature and human character -  
that Mr. Hardy's work is so interesting. 104.

All these literary figures were exemplary critics of Hardy's

work and show in their criticism much discernment and sympathy towards Hardy's purpose and much insight into his artistic methods. Unlike some of the reviewers (only a handful) they judge his novels on criteria other than the moral and take them seriously; their work bears out Cox's claim that, 'Hardy's merits had been fairly recognised before he incurred reproach on moral grounds'<sup>105</sup>. So far in his career Hardy had encountered very little hostility to his work; only a few ignorant and unprofessional comments had been passed and they were mainly relating to some character or incident disapproved of by the reviewer and not to any serious artistic flaw. Most of the eminent literary figures of his time appear to have admired his work and to have seen it as advancing the artistic development of the novel. The major issues mentioned and sometimes discussed at greater length are, as in criticism of the earlier novels; the realism of the rustics; Hardy's conception of character in general and his women characters in particular; the 'poetic' qualities of his descriptions of nature and country life; and, increasingly, his gloomy outlook on life. Where his work is compared with that of other writers he is generally likened to George Eliot and George Meredith or, in a broader sense, his fiction is felt to be akin to that of the French novelists of the period who took their art more seriously. However, most reviewers and critics of Hardy's novels, up to this point, had acknowledged his undoubted originality and genius even if they had personal reservations about the moral propriety of his subjects or found his outlook too pessimistic.

### (III) Responses to Tess and Jude

When we come to examine the criticism of Tess and Jude in this period we find that it is difficult to extract the relevant critical comments from the mass of material dealing with moral and philosophical problems raised in the novels. Some reviewers express their opinions in tones of vindictiveness and hysteria which serve only to reflect the low standard of some journals and some reviewing; others, however, write sensibly about the issues arising from the novels as well as making perceptive observations on the nature of Hardy's art. It would certainly be true to say that the so-called 'storm' over Jude was largely a result of a very few reviews and of the famous incident in which the Bishop of Wakefield sent a letter to The Yorkshire Post claiming he had burnt the book.<sup>106</sup>

Tess of the d'Urbervilles was widely reviewed, early reviews of the novel being generally more favourable than those which appeared after the book had been published for some months. Perhaps the time factor is important in that public opinion of the novel may have influenced the reactions of those critics writing later - certainly the later pieces are more condemnatory of the novel's morality. In the first place Hardy had difficulty in getting Tess published serially and had to bowdlerise it substantially for acceptance by The Graphic where it appeared between July and December 1891. The novel was restored to its original form upon publication in three-volume form in November 1891 and the reviews began to appear at the end of December.

The first batch of reviews all contain much the same points.

Richard le Gallienne writing in The Star regrets the clumsy patches of writing which break the creative flow of the novel and, like several others, he objects to what he terms 'the painful moral purpose' of the book. The gloom and determinism of Tess preoccupies many reviewers; The Daily Chronicle's reviewer expresses the effect thus:

Not Aeschylus himself nor any of his brethren, who so rigidly illustrated the doctrine of human fate, could have woven a web that should more completely enmesh a human soul than Mr. Hardy has done in the case of his heroine. <sup>107.</sup>

Another review opens with 'This is a grim Christmas gift that Mr. Hardy makes us, in his last Wessex tale', <sup>108.</sup> and The Speaker reviewer finds Tess 'unbearably sad' and remarks that Hardy is 'as remorseless as Fate itself in unfolding the drama of her (i.e. Tess's) life'. <sup>109.</sup> The same reviewer closes his article with the hope that 'in his next work Mr. Hardy will find a theme not less inspiring, but infinitely more bright'. But, in spite of finding the novel gloomy and upsetting, these first reviewers are agreed also on its brilliance and are especially taken with the character of Tess herself. Le Gallienne <sup>110.</sup> finds her less 'empty-headed' than Hardy's other heroines, the reviewer in The Speaker thinks she is Hardy's 'sweetest heroine', <sup>111.</sup> and in The Pall Mall Gazette the reviewer is also bewitched by Tess, seeing her as doomed 'by the tyranny of man, of nature, which makes woman emotionally subject to man, and of social circumstance'. <sup>112.</sup> The Athenaeum's reviewer also considers Tess the best of Hardy's heroines and agrees that though she has sinned in body, she is morally 'a pure woman'. Of the novel as a whole this reviewer writes:

In dealing with 'this sorry scheme of things entire' Mr. Hardy has written a novel that is not only good, but great. 113.

These reviewers are unanimous in agreeing that the novel deserves the adjective 'great' and write often of its 'genius'.

Very few of the run-of-the-mill reviewers and critics of Tess mention much about the art of the novel, discussion tends to centre on its morality. The reviewer in The Saturday,<sup>114.</sup> however, takes exception to the characters in Tess, describing them as 'stagey' and 'sometimes farcical'. Of Tess herself the reviewer remarks that her character is 'suggestive of all the carefully studied simplicity of the theatre, and not at all of the carelessness of the fields'.<sup>115.</sup> It never occurs to him that the theatrical qualities of Tess's character or the seeming implausibilities of the plot, which he also ridicules, might be aesthetically coherent if only he could rid himself of his rather limited notions of the art of fiction.

R. H. Hutton, writing in The Spectator,<sup>116.</sup> also writes of the 'genius' and 'power' of the novel but strongly disapproves of its morality since he believes that Tess must accept part of the blame for her downfall. Hutton quite reasonably argues that Tess should have been more open about her affairs and should not have shirked her duty. He becomes so involved in discussing what Tess should or should not have done that it almost seems that he is writing about a real person rather than a fictional creation. Other reviewers write of Tess in this way too, which is perhaps evidence of Hardy's success in making her a believable person as well as being testimony to what Harold Orel describes as



'the close, even symbiotic, relationship between life and art which every major Victorian <sup>literary</sup> critic believed in....', 117.

Hutton, like so many others, admires the description of Talbothays dairy and finds the novel dramatically effective but overall his feelings are mixed:

....it is very difficult to read, because in almost every page the mind rebels against the steady assumptions of the author, and shrinks from the untrue picture of a universe so blank and godless-118.

This sentiment is echoed over and over again in the criticism of Tess and later, of Jude. Hutton, however, always writes intelligently and sincerely of his doubts and difficulties with Tess and never merely voices conventional platitudes. Orel's estimate of him appears to be accurate; he considers Hutton to be 'the classic case of a Victorian critic whose dedication to an informed moral judgement has undermined, for later critics, the value of his aesthetic pronouncements'. 119. Throughout the Victorian age many people's faith in God and in the purpose of life had already been shaken badly by the impact of evolutionary theories and by criticism of The Bible - the fear of a purposeless universe seems to have been a strong motivating force behind the insistence of many reviewers on the maintenance of the status quo in fiction and in life.

The Times reviewed the novel favourably, declaring that 'Mr. Hardy's latest novel is his greatest', 120. although the reviewer notes the challenge to convention contained in the subtitle of the novel, 'a pure woman'. He praises the rustics and the descriptions of Talbothays and Flintcomb-Ash and all in all shows no hostility

towards the novel on any grounds. Like most of the reviews so far cited it is a fair and honest, if uninspired, assessment of the novel.

More reviews of Tess appeared in February of 1892; by now the work had been available in book form for two months and had achieved a certain notoriety on account of the morality and also on account of Tess's character in relation to the moral issues. Andrew Lang in New Review is yet another critic who takes up these issues; he is the first to mention the notorious phrase at the end of the novel, 'The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess', and comments thus:

I cannot say how much this phrase jars on one. If there be a God, who can seriously think of Him as a malicious fiend? And if there be none, the expression is meaningless.<sup>121</sup>

Like Hutton and others, Lang cannot accept the presentation of a universe with a malign purpose. He was never a great admirer of Hardy's fiction (the review of Far From the Madding Crowd was lukewarm) and concludes his review:

He does but give us of his best, and if his best be too good for us, or good in the wrong way, if, in short, we are not 'en rapport' with him, why, there are plenty of other novelists, alive and dead, and the fault may be on our side, not on his.<sup>122</sup>

This does not strike one as particularly insulting or unreasonable but Hardy (ever sensitive to critical opinion) seems to have taken exception to the rather patronising tone. In the 1892 preface to the one-volume edition of the novel he states his

objection to Lang's 'He does but give of his best'. This, in turn, prompted Lang to write a rejoinder in which he makes it clear that his distaste for Hardy's work is merely personal and that he realises he is in a minority. He describes Hardy's comments in his preface as 'a petulant expression of annoyance' and adds:

On all sides - not only from the essays of reviewers, but from the spoken opinions of the most various kinds of readers - one learns that Tess is a masterpiece.<sup>123</sup>

Lang's attitude to literature is described by Orel thus:

Lang, with relatively few exceptions, found experiments in contemporary literature distasteful. He distrusted those writers who were preparing the way for modernist perspectives: Henry James, for one; George Moore and almost all the participants in the Celtic Twilight Movement; Thomas Hardy (who never forgave Lang for his review of Tess in the New Review of February 1892); Max Beerbohm and Theodore Watts-Dunton; and practically all the French naturalists and Russian realists whose works were so controversial, and alive, for serious readers in the last quarter-century of Lang's life.<sup>124</sup>

Hardy is here seen (by Orel as well as Lang) as 'preparing the way for modernist perspectives'; this view of him rather contrasts with some later critical perspectives of his work, as will be shown in later chapters. Kenneth Graham's assessment of Hardy's place in the development of the novel as an art is remarkably similar to Orel's:

The nineties confirmed in an important way the emancipation of the novel which Moore, Hardy, and others had already begun.<sup>125</sup>

Late in 1892, more reviews of Tess appeared in some of the less well-known periodicals; these reviews tend to repeat the same points as the early ones, the only noticeable difference being the growing feeling that Tess is an immoral book. William Watson in The Academy is not among those who reject the novel's claim to greatness on account of its morality; in a long and rather unfavourable notice he nevertheless shows a more enlightened approach to criticism than most of his fellows. He says that he does not much care for the novel but that he has tried to set aside his own preferences for it is the duty of a good critic to 'attempt to abnegate (one's) prejudices, inherited or acquired....survey the thing created, in some measure, by the light of its creator'.<sup>126</sup> This is perhaps what Lang and others are unable to do. Having attempted to assess the novel impartially, Watson concludes that in spite of its faults (he objects particularly to Hardy's over-academic phraseology) Tess is a great novel:

Powerful and strange in design, splendid and terrible in execution, the story brands itself upon the mind as with the touch of incandescent iron.<sup>127</sup>

Among the less able critics the continuing objections were to the novel's morality; one in particular felt very strongly about Tess not being a pure woman:

Pure women do not, save in novels, drop into the arms of men that they do not love....she is defiled. What he (i.e. Angel) is there is no word vile enough to express.<sup>128</sup>

This reviewer and a few others write accusingly of Hardy being

influenced by Zola or Tolstoy, as if this were the ultimate in debauchery. A notice in Review of Reviews, after mentioning the Zolaesque realism of the novel, continues by saying that Hardy has 'sacrificed the higher truth of imagination for a narrower and lower kind of fidelity to the ignoble facts of life'.<sup>129</sup> So far as this reviewer and others are concerned the work of French novelists like Zola is synonymous with scandal and sex and the worst kind of realism, that of 'low life'. Such reviews are so ill-informed that they scarcely deserve a mention. Their only interest for the scholar is that they conform with what Graham describes as 'the great cry against realist pessimism that sounds through the eighties and nineties'<sup>130</sup>.

Margaret Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine,<sup>131</sup> while disapproving of the novel's didacticism recognises its artistic strengths:

We feel inclined to embrace Mr. Hardy, though we are not fond of him, in pure satisfaction with the good brown soil and substantial flesh and blood, the cows, and the mangel-wurzel, and the hard labour of the fields - which he makes us smell and see. Here is the genuine article at least. Here is a workman who, though he has his lesson hidden beneath his apron, is an artist first of all....<sup>132</sup>

The review shows that Mrs. Oliphant (like Lang and Hutton) is able to argue persuasively against the morality of the novel whilst also considering Tess to be 'finer in our opinion than anything Mr. Hardy has ever done'.<sup>133</sup> She takes issue particularly with the description of Tess as a 'pure woman' believing, like Hutton, that she is to some extent to blame for what befalls her, and that she would hardly be as naïve as Hardy paints her, coming as she did from a rural community. Most of Mrs. Oliphant's comments about Tess' character, as about all the

characters, are based upon a view of realism in the novel which is rather too literal and narrow but she argues her points reasonably. For instance, as she says, if Hardy does not believe in God then he has no reason to be angry except if he is (as she thinks) angry at God for not existing. Her comments about Tess' actions being often inconsistent with what we know of her character are also quite astute. Thus, although Mrs. Oliphant plainly considers Tess to be an immoral book, she never claims that it is a badly written book. Her criticism is very typically Victorian in that she feels it her duty to pronounce upon the morality of the novel and also in that she feels able to treat the artistic worth of the novel as largely separate from its moral stance.

Apart from the predominance of discussion of the moral issue and the gloomy outlook in the reviews of Hardy's Tess, one or two other points are mentioned with some frequency. Tess's educated speech is one, several reviewers being on the opinion that it is too educated for one with only a sixth standard education. The melodramatic quality of some characters (notably Alec) and of the plot also attracts comment; one reviewer even feels that whole sections of the novel are below standard for Hardy and that he lapses 'into the cheapest conventional style of the average popular novelist.'<sup>134</sup> Hardy's written 'style' is mentioned several times too as being uneven; reviewers also tend to dislike his pedantry, though the descriptive passages are much admired by almost all.

The reviews of Jude illustrate similar preoccupations on the part of the critics to those of Tess, the difference being that Jude arouses more extreme reactions both in favour of and

against it than Tess, because of its more extreme radicalism and pessimism. The reviewers also seem to find the novel somewhat absurd and make the most of any opportunity to make it sound more ridiculous than it is. For example:

All we know is that there are bigamies and divorces, and early infants alighting from distant lands....and soon early and late infants are attracting momentary attention by hanging each other with box cord on little pegs all around the room.

(Pall Mall Gazette, 19 Nov. 1895)<sup>135</sup>.

It is wonderful, for example, what a number of trains they miss and how much of their misery depends on this.

(Athenaeum, 23 Nov. 1895)<sup>136</sup>.

We all know perfectly well that baby Schopenhauers are not coming into the world in shoals.

(Illustrated London News, Jan 1896)<sup>137</sup>.

Such comments show how bound some reviewers were by the relation of fiction to life. If events, characters, or other aspects of a novel defied probability in life then there was no question but that the novel must be a failure. That fiction has its own laws of probability and that events, characters etc., should be judged in accordance with an internal scheme of things which might be representational or symbolic rather than realistic, does not strike these reviewers.

Others, however, were more receptive to the patterning of events, the significance of characterisation in Jude, and the novel's tragic intention:

He (i.e. Hardy) has given me the same pity and despair in view of the blind struggles of his modern English lower-middle-class people that I experience from the destinies of the august figures of Greek fable.

(W. D. Howells, Harpers Weekly,  
Dec. 1895)<sup>138</sup>.

He is the greatest living English writer of fiction. In intensity, in grip of life, and, above all, in the artistic combination of the real and the ideal, he surpasses any of his French contemporaries.

(D. F. Hannigan, Westminster Review, Jan 1896)<sup>139</sup>.

Too many reviewers have treated Jude as a polemic against marriage. Nothing could be more unjust....Mr. Hardy's novel, in so far as it is an indictment, is an indictment of much older and crueller laws than those relating to marriage, the laws of the universe.

(Richard le Gallienne, Idler,  
Feb. 1896)<sup>140</sup>.

These critics all realise that Jude aims to be something more than a sordidly realistic novel in the French mode with a dash of social criticism and a few philosophical asides. Howells likens its overall effect to Greek tragedy, Hannigan sees the imaginative heightening or idealism as related to French fiction, and le Gallienne recognises the impact of fatalism and evolutionary ideas on the novel. There are some very perceptive critical articles and reviews of Jude and we should not be led into believing that the vituperative outcries of a few reflect the novel's reception.

Apart from the absurdity of the plot and accusations of lack of realism in other spheres the main objections to Jude are because



of its criticism of social institutions such as marriage, religion, and education and its unrelieved gloom.

The Morning Post's reviewer writes:

To write a story of over 500 pages....without allowing one single ray of humour, or even of cheerfulness, to dispel for a moment the gloomy atmosphere or hopeless pessimism was no ordinary task. 141.

but Edmund Gosse surely summed up the feelings of many when he wrote:

What has Providence done to Mr. Hardy that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator? 142.

There is a sense of great bewilderment about Jude, particularly about why Hardy should be so pessimistic about life; it is usually attributed, if at all, to his being influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer. It is difficult to say whether the supposed immorality of the novel or its pessimism most upset the reviewers, certainly some of them become quite hysterical about the former. A few examples of the kind of comments made will illustrate the point:

It (i.e. Jude) affects one like a shameful nightmare, which one only wishes to forget as quickly and as completely as possible.

(Guardian, 13 Nov. 1895)<sup>143</sup>.

Humanity, as envisaged by Mr. Hardy, is largely compounded of hoggishness and hysteria.

(Jeanette Gilder, World, 13 Nov. 1895)<sup>144</sup>.

It is...the studied satyriasis of approaching senility, suggesting the morbidly curious imaginings of a masochist or some other form of sexual pervert.

(Bookman, Jan. 1896)<sup>145</sup>.

Such reviewers seem to be more interested in their own rhetoric than in criticising the novel; indeed, as I commented on similar responses to Tess, assertions of this sort can hardly be called criticism at all, although they are certainly suggestive of attitudes. As Lerner and Holmstrom maintain - quite rightly I think - such reviews do have an historical relevance 'for our picture of the Victorian response is incomplete if it includes only the intelligent critics'.<sup>146</sup>

However, it is again noticeable that several critics take the view that it is not the job of the critic or reviewer to condemn a novel because of its moral stance. W. D. Howells, for instance, admits that one is bound to question an author's presentation of such a conception of life but disputes that Jude is the type of novel to be harmful in its effect. He states this unconditionally: 'I do not believe anyone can get the slightest harm from any passage of it'.<sup>147</sup> Edmund Gosse, too, expresses his views on this clearly. He says in his review that he finds the novel 'ghastly' but continues:

So much we note, but to censure it, if it calls for censure, is the duty of the moralist and not the critic. Criticism asks how the thing is done, whether the execution is fine and convincing.<sup>148</sup>

As Lerner and Holmstrom remark, 'Few reviewers are as penetrating as Edmund Gosse was on Hardy' and they contend that:

Gosse speaks more truly for what readers were really thinking - or groping towards thinking - in the 1890's than do most of the everyday reviewers. 149.

Hardy himself obviously appreciated Gosse's criticism and wrote, rather modestly, to him:

My sincere thanks for the generous view you take of the book, which to me is a mass of imperfections. 150.

Gosse also remarks on the construction of the novel, noting that the story is 'drawn with almost mathematical rigidity' and admiring the fineness of the construction. Howells, too, singles out the structural unity of Jude as a point of artistic excellence. These early critics don't often remark on the structure of fiction since usually they do not see the novel as a patterned and structured art form. Although there was some debate about the form of the novel (e.g. James vs. Besant), this kind of discussion was in its early stages. Gosse and Howells were, of course, both writers themselves and so would obviously have a keener sense of the shaping of Jude the Obscure.

Margaret Oliphant, however, has no scruples about condemning Jude's 'immorality.' She reviewed the novel at the same time as Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did for Blackwood's<sup>151</sup> under the general heading 'The Anti-Marriage League', thus associating Jude with the fiction of 'The New Woman' in the 1890's. R. Y. Tyrrell, in a later review<sup>152</sup>, also refers to the likeness between Jude and The Woman Who Did and, as he puts it, other fiction of 'Sex and New Woman'. In fact Tyrrell considers Grant Allen's novel to be 'superior in method' to Hardy's. The implication of his comments

is that Hardy has written for the purpose of furthering the cause of female emancipation and free love or that he has pandered to the fashion for such fiction in order to make money - anathema to someone like Margaret Oliphant. Mrs. Oliphant suspects Hardy of modelling himself on Zola, although she says she cannot assure the reader of this as she has not read any of Zola's work. However, whatever the influences, Jude is not approved by Mrs. Oliphant:

....nothing so coarsely indecent as the whole history of Jude in his relations with his wife Arabella has ever been put in English print - that is to say, from the hands of a master. 153.

The review continues in this vein and develops into a tirade against 'unclean literature' and expresses profound shock (real or feigned) that Hardy should have written anything so vile as Jude. It is hard to understand why Mrs. Oliphant's strictures should have upset Hardy - one would have thought particularly after her review of Tess, that he would have developed a certain amount of immunity to criticism of this type by this stage of his career. There is little attempt in this review to assess the artistic merits of Jude or to give the book a fair hearing of any description; as with Mrs. Oliphant's review of Tess its power lies only in the articulateness of the writer not in the sentiments being voiced.

The Saturday Review's critic, now known to be H. G. Wells,<sup>154.</sup> offers a slightly more balanced and helpful perspective on the novel. He starts by informing his readers that they may be surprised to learn that the main theme of Jude is not to do with sex at all but with Christminster exercising a hold on Jude's

imagination. The most important aspect of the novel, in Wells's view, is that for the first time the obstacles confronting an ambitious man of the working class receive adequate treatment. He quotes Jude's death bed soliloquy in full and comments:

That is the voice of the educated proletarian, speaking more distinctly than it has ever spoken before in English literature....there is no other novelist alive with the breadth of sympathy, the knowledge, or the power for the creation of Jude. 155.

The reviewer here picks out an important theme in Jude - the link between social class and educational opportunity which twentieth century critics have dwelt much upon but which is not often mentioned by the Victorian reviewers. He sees Hardy is attempting to describe and gain sympathy for the plight of men like Jude and that this is something new in fiction.

Havelock Ellis also comes ably to Hardy's defence in his Savoy review,<sup>157</sup> saying that he cannot understand those critics who have written about sexual relations in Jude as if they were monstrous and indecent. Such critics must have a poor knowledge of human relationships if they believe this, and must consider human sexual relationships to be 'as simple as those of the farmyard'. Ellis also makes the point that whatever Hardy's suggestions for solving the marital and other problems of the characters in Jude it does not necessarily follow that he would advocate this as a code for life. Novels are not tracts for reform, says Ellis, and while Hardy may be justified in playing god in his created world he does not intend to play god to the real world any more than any other novelist would. Havelock Ellis's comments prove further that not all Victorian critics,

especially in this later period, still held the view that the novel should reproduce the moral standards of middle-class English society. It is actually extremely doubtful, as has been shown in this survey, if more than a few reviewers and critics ever held so simple a view of the novel. Writing of the developments in attitudes to the novel between 1865 and 1900, Graham remarks of realism:

Truth-to-life dominated the naive approach, and, much qualified, influenced others on a higher plane; but each admitted qualification, like the bend in a mirror, altered the truthful image, and made the idea of simple realism the less tenable.<sup>158</sup>

As we have seen in this examination of the reviews of Jude there was much sympathy for and understanding of Hardy's attempt to widen the scope of the English novel. Of those opposed to the novel, the majority were opposed on grounds of the novel's violation of the accepted moral code, and not necessarily because they regarded it as a badly written or artistically untruthful book. The best critics openly declared their moral position and recognised that their views should not entirely bias their judgement of the art of Jude. Those reviewers who object most violently to the indecency of the novel, such as those whose comments are recorded on page 46, appear to be second-rate hacks whose work is of little value to anyone - except perhaps the social historian.

Although the reviews of Jude the Obscure are mixed, they are no more mixed than the reviews of Hardy's earlier novels, it is just that opinions on both sides are more extreme and that discussion centres even more upon the issues of morality and

pessimism rather than on the novel's structure and coherence. However, we should resist the temptation to adopt a patronising or dismissive attitude towards the Victorian reviewers. Such an attitude is usually based on the assumption that the history of literary criticism shows a march of progress, onwards and upwards, culminating in our present apparently sophisticated critical apparatus. There is much we could learn or - to use a Hardyism - 'unlearn' from the Victorians. Whether the criticism is good, bad or indifferent, the reviewers and critics of Hardy's novels always convey the sense that the novel matters, that people will read the work under discussion and that they (the reviewers) must deal with it fairly and seriously. As one recent critic has put it:

They want to know if the particular novel is a true picture of reality and whether its effect is beneficial or pernicious. 159.

And Cox too defends their methods in his article on the Victorian reviewers:

If the criticism of the Victorian reviewers was often deflected by various forms of evangelical morality and utilitarianism, and sometimes by political and social bias, nevertheless we can claim for it a considerable degree of seriousness and responsibility. For the most part the reviewers were conscious of performing an important cultural function, of safeguarding and preserving a living tradition. They regarded the application of severe standards as a duty to the writer as well as to the reading public. 160.

The Victorian critics, unlike those of the more 'modern' period, felt it was their duty to confront literary works with their

own values and beliefs and to protest if they felt that the novelist broke the code. This was fine provided there was some sort of consensus about what ought to be included in a novel and what ought not. In the mid-Victorian period there does seem to have been tacit agreement between readers, reviewers, libraries and most writers as to what was permissible but, by the time Hardy was publishing, and particularly after 1880 this consensus or compromise was *weakening*. The reviews of Hardy's novels show the tension between those who believed the novel should embody a particular set of values and those who believed that the novel, being an art form, should have the freedom to include whatever might be necessary for the purpose of that art. There is also tension between those who believed that the novel should be realistic, in the sense of copying fairly faithfully the details of everyday life as well as its values, and those who claimed for the novel the right to portray an inner reality and to be idealistic and romantic. G. H. Lewes in Principles of Success in Literature, wrote as early as 1865:

There are other truths besides coats and waistcoats, pots and pans, drawing-room and suburban villas. Life has other aims besides those which occupy the conversation of 'society'. 161.

Hardy's own comments about fiction bear out his affinity with the idea of the novel as transmuting and transforming reality in order to illuminate something deeper and more penetrating about human experience. He commented in his article The Profitable Reading of Fiction (1888)<sup>162</sup>. that fiction should show 'life' and not 'life garniture' and in the same article stated



'Briefly, a story should be an organism!.. In spite of their differences, this is not dissimilar from James's 'A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism'.<sup>163.</sup> Other comments of Hardy's are in the same vein; he writes of art being 'a disproportioning of realities' and in The Life of his art being 'to intensify the expression of things....so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible'.<sup>164.</sup> All this points to his own intention to create, both in fiction and in poetry, in order to reveal truths and not in order to be a slave to facts and values which would inhibit his art but ensure popularity and a healthy bank balance. Hardy may have wanted to be 'a good hand at a serial' - this was to be expected - but he also aspired to be a great imaginative artist, as the above comments (as well as many others) illustrate. He is close to James in few respects but they are united in their insistence that novel-writing is an art based upon direct personal experience of life and requiring freedom of choice of subject matter and method if it is to succeed. Arguing against Besant's call for strict rules of composition for novels, James states in The Art of Fiction that 'A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life', its value, he says, lies in the intensity of the impression....'but there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say',<sup>165.</sup> And, writing of Grundyism, Hardy's own view of freedom of expression in fiction accords with this:

If the true artist ever weeps it probably is then, when he first discovers the fearful price<sup>that</sup> he has to pay for the privilege of writing in the English language - no less a price than the complete extinction, in the mind of every mature and penetrating reader, of sympathetic belief in his personages.<sup>166.</sup>

Hardy also agrees with the Jamesian stress on personal impressions in fiction. He states this most clearly in the 1895 preface to Jude:

Like former productions of this pen, Jude the Obscure is simply an endeavour to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions.<sup>167</sup>

James is probably the novelist with whom Hardy felt least sympathy and with whom he is almost always contrasted and never compared. Certainly, they both had very different paths yet they have in common that they were both working towards the same end - that of enlarging the artistic potential of the novel. Although their ideas about the direction of the novel in the future were undoubtedly different, together they wove the main threads of that future in their art and in their theories about it. In a recent article J.T. Laird remarks on the two as theorists that:

most of their observations and pronouncements on each other's writings are marred by a kind of critical myopia.<sup>168</sup>

He then goes on to argue for the dissimilarity of their approaches to fiction, as well as emphasising their differences as novelists. While more or less convincing on individual points, I think Laird misses the broader historical connection between the two. He also rather underestimates Hardy's abilities as a critic and theorist - as do most Hardy scholars.

Another major figure whom Hardy has more in common with as an artist than might be supposed is Marcel Proust. We have seen

that Proust much admired A Pair of Blue Eyes and The Well-Beloved and that he recognised in Hardy's 'Stonemason's geometry' a patterning of experiences in the novels which in some ways parallels both Proust's and Hardy's visions of life. This connection between Proust and Hardy is well expressed by Joan Grundy:

Proust and Hardy are alike in their recognition of the subjective nature of experience, and of the paramount importance of the impression. Proust, much more the intellectual and analytical of the two, both expounds and acts upon his insights, thus filling out for us perceptions which in Hardy remain relatively mere 'obiter dicta', inklings followed intuitively rather than deliberately.<sup>169</sup>

Although Proust, like James, is clearly a more articulate theorist than Hardy and writes more comprehensively about the art of fiction, the foregoing discussion has, I think, shown that Hardy was far less intuitive and far more deliberate in his method than Grundy suggests.

The novel as an art form is once again clearly in Hardy's mind in this letter to Alfred Austin, Editor of The National Review, in appreciation of a complimentary but rather uninspired review of Tess which had appeared in his magazine.<sup>170</sup> Hardy says of the review:

It has the merit (if I may criticise a critic), strangely absent from English criticism in general, of looking at the novel, primarily, as an artistic whole, and inquiring whether the author has succeeded in his attempt to produce that whole.<sup>171</sup>

There are then, many comments in Hardy's notebooks, articles, and diaries which testify to his concern that the novel should be treated fairly and seriously as an art form. In his discussion of the state of novel theory in this period in England, Kenneth Graham accords Hardy some status as a theorist. Writing of the move towards idealism, he comments:

An idealist theory of fiction along these lines is Thomas Hardy's: in fact, his eventual abandonment of the novel for poetry can perhaps be foreseen in the high, Sidneyan aims he set for it.<sup>172</sup>

However, while defending Hardy's own abilities as a critic of his novels I would also maintain that his art was more widely appreciated and its particular qualities more readily understood by the Victorian reviewers and critics than we tend to think. The reviews and articles examined in this chapter show that as well as some ignorance and stolid conservatism there was much enthusiasm for new approaches to the art of fiction. Many of the literary fraternity - writers and critics alike - worked towards what they saw as the 'liberation' of the English novel. While not always explicitly stated, nor completely thought through, there is a recognition by many of Hardy's part in this movement to free the novel from the constraints of realism and moral conformity. Attitudes, of course, differ according to the abilities and beliefs of the particular critic or reviewer, but the aligning of Hardy with other forward-thinking novelists of the day, no matter how different, testifies to this.

For instance, Hardy is likened most often to George Eliot and George Meredith in Britain, and to George Sand, Zola and

Flaubert on the continent. So far as the comparison with the French writers goes, George Sand, as we have seen, treated country life in a roughly similar way to Hardy but, more broadly, the affinity lies in their both being poetic, even romantic novelists. The same kind of affinity exists between the work of Hardy and Flaubert - in spite of their very different methods. It is more surprising however, that Hardy should be compared also with Zola who seems so very different from Flaubert and Sand. It is largely in reviews of his later novels, Tess and Jude, that the Zolaesque qualities of Hardy's work are mentioned - usually in a tone of disapproval. Thus it is the element of sordid social realism in these novels which forms the most likely basis for the comparison. What is interesting is that Hardy is being seen as both a social realist and a poetic idealist. This claiming of Hardy for both 'camps', as it were, is something we shall see more of in later periods.

The comparison of Hardy with George Eliot has, as I have indicated, less to do with their provincialism and their rustic characters than with their tendency to philosophise and to take a tragic view of life. Both writers lost their Christian faith and both were strongly influenced by evolutionary theory, and it is in their assimilation of this view of life into the texture of their art that they have most in common. The Victorians do not seem to see this. There is some suggestion in Moule's early comments, and in the criticism of writers of the calibre of Patmore, Barrie, and Ellis (see pages 41-49), that they do see Hardy's fiction as a dramatic response to a changed, perhaps more brutal vision of the world. Gosse and Ellis hint that Hardy's conception of the role of woman has something to do with this

but on the whole there is almost no recognition of Hardy's and George Eliot's novels being linked by a common response to evolution. More recent criticism has paid fuller attention to this and the kinds of connections between Hardy and Eliot in this respect are suggested by Roger Ebbatson's comment:

Evolutionary theory gave the writer a number of insights which he could use, notably the concept of struggle linked with man's animal past; the idea of vast stretches of time; and the alteration from fixed systems to a vision of development and process.<sup>173</sup>

Ebbatson also notes that in the immediately post-Darwinian years (i.e. after 1859) 'human character is for the first time in literature envisaged as subject to the laws of biology'.<sup>174</sup>

This explains, at least in part, Hardy's emphasis on the power of sexual attraction which the reviewers were so shocked at.

Gillian Beer, like Ebbatson, sees the connection between Eliot and Hardy in terms of response to evolutionary theory.<sup>175</sup> She suggests that their fiction is based upon a fascination with Darwin's writing on 'relations' and 'origins' and that both use the image of the web (as does Darwin himself) to explain the interdependence of the two. The need to show life as a system of interconnected people and places perhaps accounts for both writers basing their novels in provincial or 'closed' societies where the matter of 'relations' and 'origins' can be closely studied. The image of the web is fundamental to Middlemarch and recurs frequently, unifying the novel. Although George Eliot means that the image of the web should convey the sense of the inter-relation of the whole and, as a consequence of her humanism, the duty of each to the others, the sense we are actually left with is of the individual caught in the web, unable to exercise free will:

For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.<sup>176</sup>

Hardy's characters are trapped by heredity, and environment, much like George Eliot's, and he too describes the relations between human beings through the image of a web:

The human race to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider's web if touched.<sup>177</sup>

The impact of evolutionary theory on the art of the novel was that it opened up new possibilities - a fact which is now increasingly being recognised but which Hardy's contemporaries only glimpsed rather faintly. It is not so much that Hardy and Eliot had ideas or even that they wanted to convey them through their fiction; the important development is in the way in which their ideas were translated into the very substance of their art so that the response to scientific ideas, particularly evolutionary theory, alters the whole conception and structure of their novels. The ability to assimilate ideas into their art is what differentiates Eliot and Hardy from a writer like George Meredith who was equally profoundly affected by evolutionary theory but who failed to assimilate it fully - in his novels, at least. The admiration of late Victorian intellectuals for Meredith's ideas and the excessively high esteem in which they held his novels is testimony to the importance they placed upon novels becoming philosophical, organs of advanced thinking. Tess Cosslett<sup>178</sup> argues for Meredith's poetic response to scientific ideas but rather dismisses the novels, mentioning them only in passing at the start of her chapter on Meredith:

Meredith among Victorian poets, like George Eliot among the novelists, seems to me to have most whole-heartedly absorbed and accepted the Victorian scientific world view. I find this acceptance more evident in his poetry than in his novels, and particularly in his Nature poetry, where abstract concepts about Nature's structure are fused together with concrete description of Nature's beautiful appearances.<sup>179.</sup>

While in one sense Cosslett's view confirms the gap which exists between Hardy and Meredith as novelists (they do not appear to have any fictional techniques in common), in another sense it serves to reinforce the likeness between them which the Victorian reviewers and critics so stressed. For one thing there is a connection in that both writers' absorption of the implications of evolutionary theory and other scientific ideas is centred on their conception and portrayal of Nature. A further link between the two writers, and one noticed by the Victorians, is their primarily poetic and inspirational approach; this, in retrospect, has provided a more important connection than the holding of radical opinions in novel form. George Eliot herself declared Meredith's genius to be poetical<sup>180.</sup> but the assessment by S. P. Sherman of Meredith's historical importance summarises his qualities best and shows the fundamental contrast between his genius and Hardy's:

....he will survive not merely as an epigrammatist, or as a subtle poet, or as a psychologizing novelist but as a man with a mine of vital ideas, a constructive critic of life, if not an artist, at any rate a genius, one of the spokesmen and master spirits of his time.<sup>181.</sup>

It is because - in his novels at least - Meredith is not truly an artist that he cannot usefully be compared with Hardy,



although that the Victorians should see likenesses between the two writers is understandable.

By arguing for Hardy's place in the so-called 'liberation' of the novel from its slavery to realism and the expectations of a predominantly middle-class press and public, I would not want to give the impression that there were not virtues as well as vices in that old-fashioned English novel which James likened to a pudding. However, given that there was a growing movement away from such fare, I think Hardy has a good claim to be part of that movement. His contemporaries thought so too and writers like Gosse, Barrie, Patmore, Ellis, Stephen, Hutton and Howells show that they are not bound by the inflexibility and conventionality which marks the attitudes of the worst Victorian reviewers. The best of the Victorian critics, while they are apparently less sophisticated than our most recent critics, are well able to make sensible judgements about the merits of Hardy's novels as well as about their weaknesses. If there is any one aspect of Hardy's fiction about which the Victorians are most united in their protest it is the pessimism of Hardy's vision of life. In the final analysis this upsets them more than the challenge to social institutions and conventional morality; it is this which Hardy's early twentieth century critics also find hard to accept and is what unites these early commentators with them.

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173. Roger Ebbatson, The Evolutionary Self. Hardy, Foster, Lawrence. Sussex 1982. p.xiii.
174. Ebbatson, p.xx.
175. Gillian Beer, Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction. London 1983.
176. Middlemarch, p.896.
177. 4 March, 1886. Life p.177.
178. Tess Cosslett, The 'Scientific Movement' and Victorian Literature. Sussex 1982.
179. Cosslett, p.101.

180. The Leader, 5 January 1856. In a review of Meredith's The Shaving of Shagpat: 'The Shaving of Shagpat, is a work of genius, and of poetical genius'. In Ioan Williams (Ed.), Meredith. The Critical Heritage. London 1971. p.41.
181. 'Meredith's Historical Importance', Nation LXXXVIII, 3 June 1909. In Ioan Williams (Ed.), Meredith. The Critical Heritage. p.488.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Post-Victorian Critical Attitudes

This chapter is concerned with critical studies of Hardy's novels which appeared after the completion of his novel-writing career in 1895 and up to his death in 1928. The only exceptions to this are the studies by Annie Macdonell and, more importantly, Lionel Johnson, both of which appeared before the publication of Jude.

If any useful generalisations can be made about the period as a whole then it may, perhaps, be seen as a period of transition from traditionally Victorian conceptions of the novel to more recognisably twentieth century ones. The seeds of the new attitude to the novel as an art form were, as we have seen, sown in the years from 1870 to 1895; in this period there is a firming up of what are basically Jamesian notions of the novel as a formally and intricately woven structure in which all the parts must be related to the whole. There is also, in the twenties, much interest in Hardy's pessimism as a philosophy rather than as part of his art. This emphasis upon the novel as a vehicle for ideas was also initiated in the earlier period and was what caused critics and reviewers to compare Hardy with George Eliot and George Meredith. Thus, while there is some intelligent and inspired discussion of Hardy's art, criticism in this period is not really characterised by its vitality and originality, nor by the thrust of its debate.

The style of the better critics is usually leisurely and

impressionistic; their work is explanatory rather than exploratory. The worst criticism is tediously descriptive, relating the plots in detail, paraphrasing Hardy's 'philosophy' and moralising about the characters' personality defects. Hardy does, however, enjoy a high reputation in these years up to his death and, while they often dislike aspects of his novels, most critics take it very much for granted that he is a great writer.

Because of the descriptive nature of the criticism in this period, and because no one particular critic (apart from Lionel Johnson) stands out as a major influence on the other writers, I have chosen here to examine treatment of certain themes rather than to deal with each critical work chronologically. The areas most often dwelt upon by critics in this period are: Hardy's thought; nature, landscape and Wessex; and what might broadly be termed the art of the novels, including discussion of architectural structure, dramatic unity, characterisation and plot, and Hardy's style. I have therefore divided this chapter into three sections corresponding to these areas of discussion.

Criticism in this period is still largely practised by creative artists and men of letters; it is largely a record of individual tastes and bears little resemblance to the profession of criticism we now have and which can be seen beginning to establish itself after 1930. Thus, while here we can gain a sense of the tastes and preoccupations of individuals and, where they concur (as they quite often do), a sense of the tastes of the period as a whole, we do not see the kind of involvement nor feel the heat of the debate that was evident in the reviews and is evident in the criticism between 1930 and 1950.

(I) Hardy's Thought

Two critics who exemplify the differences and similarities between Victorian and more modern perspectives are Lionel Johnson and D. H. Lawrence. Their works are separated by only twenty years but their moral and aesthetic stances are worlds apart. However, they have it in common that they object to Hardy's pessimistic outlook on life, and also that their criticism, in its different ways, is sensitive and intelligent.

Johnson epitomises all that is best about the Belles Lettres tradition; his work is honest in its impressionism and urbane and articulate in style. Derek Stanford has said of his criticism as a whole:

To have committed regularly to paper a criticism so eminently literative in itself, is to have fulfilled, in a way quite other than its author intended, what Oscar Wilde campaigned for in his phrase "the critic as artist".<sup>1</sup>

His The Art of Thomas Hardy<sup>2</sup> was well-received and is still held to be one of the most illuminating commentaries on Hardy's art, but its subjectivism and impressionism mean that it remains a personal response rather than a seminal work. Lawrence, on the other hand, in his Study of Thomas Hardy (1914)<sup>3</sup>, writes in a direct and forthright manner; he does not attempt to be fair-minded nor to understand Hardy's perspective as Johnson does, but his work is revealing about those elements of Hardy's art which he finds worth commenting on.

Johnson, like Arthur Symons whose work is discussed later, was very much a poet of the 1890's but, unlike Symons he did not wish to be associated with fin-de-siècle aestheticism and what he called Symons's 'amoral pessimism'.<sup>4</sup> His views of Hardy's art are informed by both artistic and moral interests. In fact Johnson makes it clear at the start of his book that he thinks all art is inextricably bound up with morality and that he admires Hardy's novels precisely because they address themselves to moral issues. Johnson also admires Hardy's refusal to court popular taste or bow to convention; he claims that Hardy has not pandered to 'prejudice or preference of any kind.' His assessment of Hardy's thought is based largely upon his comments on Tess of the d'Urbervilles where he feels Hardy has shown 'courage and conscientiousness' but has also shown himself too much of a pessimist and a radical for Johnson's taste.

However, in spite of his disinclination for Hardy's outlook on life, Johnson is careful to attempt to separate his own beliefs and opinions from his criticism of Hardy's abilities as an artist. His objection to Tess is anyway more than a matter of personal taste or moral stringency; he also objects on the grounds of art because the novel contains too many philosophical intrusions. In Johnson's view a novel should convey its philosophy and moral position through dramatic presentation:

In art, nothing is more difficult than to turn theories of ethics, or of metaphysics, into living motives; than the expression of them through the treatment of human characters and of human actions: the genius of Browning could not always overcome that difficulty. For a false step here is irrecoverable: a false thought may vitiate the whole book.....when the reader

is following the fortunes of Tess, he hates to fall into some track of thought, which leads him to the debateable land, where he must listen to Aristotle and Rousseau, Aquinas and Hegel, Hobbes and Mill, Sir Henry Maine and Mr. Herbert Spencer. (p.232)

This Jamesian preference for 'showing' rather than 'telling' is, as we shall see, characteristic of all criticism in this period which treats the novel seriously as art. For Johnson, Tess is a simple and beautiful story spoiled by its overt didacticism as well as its authorial intrusions:

.....novels which 'vindicate the ways of God to man' are indeed wearisome, but fully as wearisome are those, which vindicate the ways of man to God: and it is because Tess of the D'Urbervilles contains so much insinuated argument of this kind, to the detriment of its art, that I cannot rank it so high, as certain other of Mr. Hardy's books. (p.232)

Johnson also criticises Hardy's 'argument' because it is logically 'a tangle of inconsistencies'; nature, society and God are all blamed for Tess' plight and this, in his view, is because Hardy is confused in his thinking.

In general, Johnson thinks Hardy's philosophy is akin to that of the Greeks, but without the sense of justice implicit in the fatalism of Greek literature. Tess cannot be called a tragic novel because it is too deterministic; if all that happens to Tess is inevitable then, 'there was no real struggle of the will with adverse circumstances, no conflict of emotions, nor battle of passions...(p.250). Some might find this very inevitability tragic but Johnson makes it clear that he is not one:

I can find in it nothing, but a reason for keeping unbroken silence. Least of all, do I find in it an excuse for setting up a scarecrow God, upon whom to vent our spleen. (p.263)

He insists that he cannot accept Hardy's determinism, he must believe that there is meaning and purpose in the universe. However, in the final analysis, Johnson is able to come to terms with Hardy's art by ignoring the thought:

.....without changing a single incident of the story, it is possible to reject Mr. Hardy's moral: read it apart from his commentary, and it loses nothing of its strength: rather it gains much. (p.265)

Tess' beauty and goodness and the beauty of some of the passages, as well as Hardy's obvious sincerity, are enough to compensate for the grim message about life.

It may seem odd to us now that Johnson can apparently enjoy the novel whilst so clearly separating and rejecting Hardy's ideas; we are very much conditioned to look at the whole as a unified entity, but this is in some measure also what Lawrence does in his Study of Thomas Hardy. He takes up here many of the same issues as Johnson in relation to Hardy's pessimism and the tragedy but he interprets them rather differently. For instance, Lawrence thinks the 'philosophy' is a separate issue but for him it is separate from the real insights of Hardy's work rather than from the story. Lawrence feels Hardy has a primitive and instinctual feel for life and art and that this operates on a more profound level than that of discourse:

His feeling, his instinct, his sensuous understanding is, however, apart from his metaphysic, very great and deep, deeper than that perhaps, of any other English novelist. Putting aside his metaphysic, which must always obtrude when he thinks of people, and turning to the earth, to landscape, then he is true to himself. (p.92)

But, like Johnson, Lawrence is critical of Hardy's conception of tragedy. According to Lawrence, Hardy's work shows some of the greatness of the work of Sophocles, or Shakespeare. Like them he sets the lesser human drama against a larger universal setting of 'the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature of of life itself', but, unlike them his protagonists are not punished by 'the greater, uncomprehended morality, or fate'; they are punished by 'the lesser, human morality'. Thus in the novels of Hardy (Tolstoy is also mentioned):

There is a lack of sternness, there is a hesitating betwixt life and public opinion, which diminishes the Wessex novels from the rank of pure tragedy. (p.31)

Lawrence is here making the assumption that the classical conception of tragedy is 'pure' and therefore the best and right one. He differs from Johnson in his interpretation of tragedy in Hardy's novels in that he thinks Hardy's characters should break free from the constraints of conventional social and moral values and assert their individuality, their presence in relation to the larger universal life forces. Johnson, of course, being a Catholic, thinks Hardy should place his faith in the ultimate meaning and purpose of the whole universal scheme rather than in the assertion of individuality. It is interesting to witness the efforts of two most intelligent critics to come to

terms with an attitude to life with which they are completely out of sympathy. Johnson does this, as we saw, by reading the story and ignoring the moral, Lawrence does it by dismissing what he does not like and focussing on what he, Lawrence, finds suited to his own ideas about art. It is generally acknowledged that Lawrence's study tells us more about Lawrence than Hardy yet, curiously, by showing us how Lawrence responded to Hardy it has the effect of 'placing' Hardy in the history and development of the English novel. Lawrence's response certainly adds weight to Ian Gregor's contention that 'where Jude ends The Rainbow begins'.<sup>5</sup>

What both Johnson and Lawrence object to most in Hardy's thought is his determinism - such a denial of freedom of choice is incompatible with their conception, not only of tragedy, but of the whole universal scheme of things. Such a view is also expressed by G. K. Chesterton in The Victorian Age in Literature.<sup>6</sup> His distaste for Hardy's attitude to life is not unlike Lawrence's insofar as he sees it as an expression of the weakness of modern life and art. Although, like Johnson, a converted Catholic, Chesterton's critical comments show none of his sympathy and fairness; in tone they have the same stridency as Lawrence's.

For Chesterton Hardy's gloom is a reflection of the unhealthy and morbid state of late Victorian society after the disintegration of the mid-Victorian compromise. His remarks on Hardy as a writer of the Victorian age are not extensive but his opinion is very decided. Hardy is compared with Meredith, whom Chesterton sees as the other 'big' late Victorian writer. He



indulges in a long metaphor of comparison and contrast in which Hardy emerges as the supreme pessimist and Meredith as the supreme optimist. He concludes thus:

Meredith became, at his best, a sort of daintily dressed Walt Whitman. Hardy became a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot. (p.62)

Both writers are, for Chesterton, 'brilliant novelists' but they have in common a tendency to lose their artistic control; in Meredith's case this leads to farcical and extravagant comedy while Hardy indulges in 'the extravagance of depression' (p.63). An example of this 'extravagance of depression' is given from Tess:

The placing of the weak lover and his new love in such a place that they actually see the black flag announcing that Tess has been hanged is utterly inexcusable in art and probability; it is a cruel practical joke. But it is a practical joke at which even its author cannot brighten up enough to laugh. (p.63)

This example illustrates the absoluteness of Chesterton's inability to comprehend a view of life so different from his own, just as it also exposes a very narrow perception of the limitations and scope of fiction.

Chesterton blames Hardy's extreme pessimism and Meredith's extreme optimism on their atheism and his thoughts on this echo not only Johnson but reviewers like Gosse, Hutton and Lang. He accuses Hardy of setting up a God so that he can 'give it a piece of his mind':

It has been said that if God had not existed it would have been necessary to invent Him. But it is not often, as in Hardy's case, that it is necessary to invent Him in order to prove how unnecessary (and undesirable) He is. (p.63)

While one can take Chesterton's point, like most of the other points he makes, it lacks moderation and critical insight. His own religious and moral convictions prevent him from making any fair assessment of Hardy's literary merits. To his credit, he never pretends otherwise, it is just his own brand of criticism and we must take it or leave it. Ronald Knox's comment on Chesterton's approach to writing biography and history seems equally applicable to his attempts at literary criticism:

His life of Dickens is an admirable performance, but it is really the Chestertonian philosophy as illustrated by the life of Dickens; his History of England is a brilliant resumé, but it is a history of Chesterton rather than of England.<sup>7</sup>

In the previous chapter it was noted by John Bayley that James was unable to appreciate, in his review of Far From The Madding Crowd, a fictional method so different from his own. It would certainly seem, as Bayley suggested, that certain powerful personalities have such inflexible opinions that they are unable to appreciate fairly or to criticise impartially the work of one who has a different view of life or art. This is not to say that such 'personalities' lack insight or intelligence but that being in the grip of strong convictions about the nature of things can act negatively in criticism. Chesterton's criticism shows this, as does that of James and Lawrence, and so in later years (see Chapter Three) does that of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis.

As well as those who rejected Hardy's perspective on life there were also some critics who tried to excuse it or explain it away. H. C. Duffin<sup>8</sup>, for instance, argues that Hardy's godless universe is not a philosophical statement on the author's part but rather that, in the texture of the novels themselves, he makes a religion out of it. Hardy cannot be called a pessimist because he shows mankind in too worthy a light in the novels. Harold Williams<sup>9</sup> expresses a similar view:

But though he (i.e. Hardy) refuses the sop which Hope holds out and most men clutch at, there is no weakness in the mental atmosphere of the novels. For, unlike many theoretical and temperamental pessimists, Mr. Hardy is imbued with the spirit of a human and personal sympathy. (p.423)

Thus for Duffin and Williams, Hardy's atheism and his pessimism are qualified by a kind of humanism. This is also borne out by Bonamy Dobrée's comment towards the end of this period:

Thus what it is that redeems Hardy is, almost obviously, the tragic richness of his pessimism, the humanity, the sympathy which he brings to it.<sup>10</sup>

There is much critical debate in this period about the causes of Hardy's pessimism and how like or unlike it is to the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Hardy always strenuously denied the influence of philosophical pessimism but we should not necessarily trust his denials. C. J. Weber has studied a copy of Schopenhauer's On the Four-fold root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason<sup>11</sup> which belonged to Hardy and reports on the many detailed markings and comments in the margin, which show,

says Weber, that 'Hardy not only read Schopenhauer but studied him, diligently and long'. This does not, of course, prove influence, especially as the first translation of Schopenhauer (The World as Will and Idea) was not available in England until 1883,<sup>12</sup> by which time Hardy had written many of his novels. It does, however, suggest that Hardy may have received confirmation of his tendency to look on the black side of things and it is possible to argue that philosophical pessimism (as opposed to pessimism in its more general sense) may have influenced later works such as the novels after The Mayor of Casterbridge and The Dynasts. In an extremely interesting article on 'Schopenhauer and Pessimism in Nineteenth Century English Literature',<sup>13</sup> Ralph Goodale argues that:

the pessimism of late nineteenth century England and America is due to certain social causes which clearly had begun to operate before Schopenhauer was known.  
(p.260)

In his discussion of the possible influence of either Schopenhauer or Von Hartmann on Hardy's work he suggests that 'Schopenhauer was partly responsible for the mythology in The Dynasts' but concludes:

There is no reason to believe that pessimistic philosophy served him for more than illustration of his views. (p.253)

However, this was not the view of one section of the critics in the early twentieth century. They attach a great deal of importance to Hardy's pessimism as a philosophy and treat it as

if it were distinct and paraphrasable. There is little discussion of the ideas as a framework for the dramatic presentation or of whether Hardy's world view is aesthetically coherent. Herbert Grimsditch<sup>14</sup>, for instance, sees Hardy's pessimistic streak as a reflection of the spirit of the age he lived in; by this he means the intellectual currents:

Writing in an age of great scientific and philosophic activity, he could hardly fail to be influenced by the spirit of his time. (p.18)

But, rather than going on to examine the impact of this 'spirit' on Hardy's art, Grimsditch is more interested in seeking out the influences. He attributes Hardy's concept of the immanent will to Schopenhauer but finds that their philosophies differ in that:

Schopenhauer's way of escape.....is through art and benevolence, while Hardy seems to imply that the ills of life are best borne by the aid of a grave, stoical resignation. (p.20)

Although Grimsditch pays Hardy the compliment of taking his ideas seriously, there is a sense gained in reading his criticism that we are talking about philosophy rather than literature.

Among those critics who discuss Hardy's ideas as systematic philosophy there are a number who are very hostile to them. Patrick Braybrooke, in a very dull book devoted exclusively to Hardy's philosophy<sup>15</sup>, talks of his 'dangerous and detestable pessimism'; the critic Edward Wright comments on

'the unwholesomeness of his view of life';<sup>16</sup> and W. L. Phelps refers to 'the cold mathematical precision' in Hardy's way of thought'.<sup>17</sup>

The most extensive study of Hardy's philosophy, however, is Ernest Brennecke's book, Thomas Hardy's Universe: a Study of a Poet's Mind.<sup>18</sup> This work is devoted almost exclusively to the comparison between Hardy and Schopenhauer and concentrates on The Dynasts where it touches on Hardy's art at all. The Dynasts is seen as the culmination of Hardy's development as a philosopher because in it Hardy reveals that he is not a pessimist at all but an optimist. Brennecke bases his argument on the suggestion at the end of that work that the Immanent Will may eventually become conscious and sympathetic and reveal to mankind the longer term purposes of life which at present he cannot see. Brennecke argues cogently but he almost always writes of Hardy's thought as an abstraction and rarely considers it as embodied in Hardy's works - novels or poems.

Amidst all the discussion of Hardy's pessimism and of his debt to Schopenhauer there are some perceptions about this thought in relation to his art in this period. In spite of his dismay at Hardy's gloom, Lionel Johnson is able to set aside his personal beliefs and attempt to identify imaginatively with the Hardy 'World'. The ability to appreciate that a novel has some sort of aesthetic shape which does not depend upon the critic's approval, is rare in this period. Johnson has this ability; so does Lascelles Abercrombie<sup>19</sup>, although he is not particularly perceptive on some other areas of Hardy's art. He maintains

that Hardy's art is superior because it does have a 'metaphysic' rather than in spite of it. By placing his art under the control of a 'metaphysic', Hardy has 'made the novel capable of the highest service to man's consciousness - made it truly the equal of drama and sculpture'. Abercrombie echoes Johnson when he writes:

It is nothing to criticism, whether one considers the basic metaphysic of artistic expression to be a true or false, an agreeable or disagreeable representation of the manner of our existence in this world. (p.116)

As practising poets, both Johnson and Abercrombie place aesthetic considerations above those of personal taste or philosophic consistency.

Another creative writer who takes this view of Hardy's thought is Virginia Woolf.<sup>20</sup> In her article upon Hardy's death she comments:

Nothing is easier, especially with a writer of marked idiosyncrasy, than to fasten on opinions, convict him of a creed, tether him to a consistent point of view. (p.193)

She says it is up to the reader to beware of doing this:

It is his part to know when to put aside the writer's conscious intention in favour of some deeper intention of which perhaps he may be unconscious. (p.193).

This is really rather similar to what Lawrence was getting at in his comments, and she is one with him in finding Hardy's

conscious philosophy one of his weakest points:

Certainly it is true to say of him that,  
at his greatest, he gives us impressions;  
at his weakest, arguments. (p.194)

Thus we can see that there is a wide range of responses to Hardy's thought in this period but, generally speaking, there are three main threads. There are those who cannot adequately discuss Hardy's art because his ideas are anathema to them; there are those who discuss it seriously but as a separate abstract discourse; and thirdly, there are those - all creative writers themselves - who maintain that whether we agree with Hardy's view or not, it is the business of criticism to try not to let such opinions colour an assessment of his artistic merits. Naturally, some comments fall between these views but the third group is the one which seems most helpful in furthering discussion of the novel as a form of art. The only drawback to the criticism of this group is that those who preach it (Johnson, Lawrence, Woolf) tend to dismiss Hardy's conscious ideas and his moral position rather than try to come to terms with their articulation in his art as a whole.

## (II) Nature, Landscape and Wessex

Almost as predominant as debate about Hardy's thought, particularly his pessimism, is discussion of his portrayal of nature and rural life. But, whereas critics tend to write rather naïvely about the relationship between art and thought, they are more perceptive when dealing with the role of nature and the rural in the novels. The Victorian reviewers, as we saw, often looked at the Wessex landscape and the rustics largely in terms of their



likeness to such scenes and people in real life; this rather simple approach has more or less disappeared by the turn of the century and Hardy's rural world is much appreciated for its poetic qualities - as indeed it was by some of the better Victorian critics. Sometimes the criticism in this period is only 'appreciation', sometimes new insights emerge. Certainly, writers like Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and Lascelles Abercrombie - all poets themselves - are clearly able to recognise the centrality of the natural and the rural to Hardy's imaginative vision. Johnson, for example, stresses the visionary quality of the descriptions of natural landscapes:

He has, what Hawthorne had, a gift of sight into the spirit of place: a most rare gift. (p.64)

The likeness of Hardy's art to that of Hawthorne is also picked up by Abercrombie, though in a slightly different context. He sees Hardy novels as having qualities which are usually only exhibited in short stories such as those of Hawthorne:

For in Hardy's hands, fiction has done, in the scale of the novel, what previously it could only do with certainty and ease in the scale of the short story; the power of making a human action render, with astonishing impressiveness, and by means of a most exact formality, some metaphysic of existence is clear in Hawthorne's tales. But, splendid as several of his novels are, this power is only diluted when Hawthorne works to the scale of the novel. With Hardy it is the other way round; to exercise this power, his fiction requires expatiation rather than concentration.<sup>21</sup>

Thus both Johnson and Abercrombie recognise in Hardy's art as a novelist striking qualities of 'impressiveness' in rendering

human action (Abercrombie) and a visionary 'gift' of penetration into 'the spirit of place' (Johnson). Such insights link the work of these early critics with much more recent perceptions about the nature not only of Hardy's fiction, but of American fiction. For example, M. D. Zabel - himself an American critic - comments on Hardy in 1940:

He now appears to us as a realist developing towards allegory.....He stands in a succession of novelists that includes Melville, Emily Bronte and Hawthorne.....<sup>22</sup>.

Interestingly, Zabel maintains that before 1940, Hardy was misrepresented by critics who failed to recognise the 'real' nature of his achievement in the novel. While they approach what we might term Hardy's 'anti-realism' from different angles, it would seem that Johnson, Abercrombie and Zabel are united across the years in their perception of Hardy as a novelist who does not fit easily into the solidly English tradition. Although he does not specifically mention Hardy, Richard Chase dwells upon the fundamental differences between the British novel and the American novel in his book The American Novel and its Tradition.<sup>23</sup> What he says about Wuthering Heights, for instance, could as well apply to Hardy's fiction; he maintains that although this novel cannot readily be fitted into the English tradition, it has much in common with the tradition in America:

Like many of the fictions discussed in this book Wuthering Heights proceeds from an imagination that is essentially melodramatic, that operates among radical contradictions and renders reality indirectly or poetically, thus breaking, as Mr. Leavis observes, with the traditions that require a surface rendering of real life and a resolution of themes, "romantic" or otherwise. (p.4)

It hardly needs saying that Hardy's novels are all much more of 'a surface rendering of real life' than Wuthering Heights but the comments made here by Chase about 'contradictions' and rendering reality 'indirectly or poetically' are appropriate to Hardy.

The most important issue here is that some early critics anticipated the later vision of Hardy as a symbolic and allegorical novelist; Lionel Johnson, particularly, shows his recognition of this in his comments on nature, landscape and Wessex. Having likened Hardy to Melville he goes on to make further relevant comparisons and contrasts between Hardy and other writers. He differentiates Hardy's method of description from that of a writer like Zola whose descriptions are technically accurate but which fail to evoke, as Hardy's do 'the whole aspect of place.' This, in turn, immediately calls to mind the comparison between Hardy and George Sand dealt with in the last chapter (see pp 18-20) as do Johnson's subsequent observations. He maintains that Hardy's presentation of the natural environment has been constantly misunderstood by critics because they confuse truth in art with literal realism. Wessex is very definite and is historically and geographically real because it is part of Hardy's purpose to show the way that the lives of ordinary folk are united by work and common interest and by trivial experiences which gradually evolve into tragedy. Thus Wessex is a microcosm of human society at large and, in depicting the general through the particular, Hardy shows himself to have a similarity to the Bronte's and George Eliot which lies in:

The power to touch all hearts and minds, not by vague generalities common to all the world, but by the evocation, from special things, of a general truth. (p.115)

But, Johnson says, the representativeness of the rural community does not make it less real; in his view it is the more so because rural life is not just decorative background in Hardy's novels, it is at their centre. Such a method is closer to the popular approach to literature than the academic in Johnson's view. Thus he shows himself close to Hardy's own view of his art:

Art is a disproportioning - (i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion) - of realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence "realism" is not Art.<sup>24</sup>

Particularly close is this point about the distinction between truth to life and truth in art. He is defending the rustics' speech:

Mr. Hardy knows that a novel is not a phonograph, any more than it is a photograph: and he contrives to reconcile the demands of truth with those of art, in a way which brings Wessex before our eyes, and the memory of its speech to our ears. (p.165)

Though, not always as penetrating as Johnson in their criticism, other critics of this period are eager to praise Hardy for his presentation of nature, landscape and the rural community.

Annie Macdonell, for instance, writing in the same year as Johnson<sup>25</sup> in a book which as one critic says, 'has some sensible and still relevant comments',<sup>26</sup> also sees Wessex as more than a

suitably realistic backcloth for the action. She describes it as being 'always inevitable and organic' and, like several others in this period, stresses its affinity with Wordsworth's countryside.

Also, in common with others in this period, she describes Hardy's landscapes as participants in the human drama, concluding that:

Nature and human nature.....act and react  
on each other with constant power. (p.169)

Lascelles Abercrombie sees individual personality and the life of the community both immersed in the larger surrounding life of nature, which is:

.....a vast impressive organism living  
her own immense life, multitudinous but  
obscurely unanimous. (p.50)

This and other comments of Abercrombie's on nature in Hardy's novels show that he senses the sinister and supernatural elements of the presentation - its relation to Hardy's vision of humanity:

.....the background of nature seems to  
exist chiefly as a spectacular variation  
of human moods. (p.44)

And, in his discussion of the presentation of Egdon Heath, he writes of:

The potency issuing darkly out of that  
space of desolation, and staining with  
inevitable tragedy the persons that move  
within it. (p.43)

Abercrombie's comments certainly suggest that malignity of aspects of nature and landscape in Hardy's novels.

Another critic, H. C. Duffin,<sup>27.</sup> writes well on the link between the natural and the supernatural in an otherwise uneven book on Hardy. While some observations of Duffin's are crude, his insight into the 'ghosts' in Hardy's novels is quite well developed. Duffin notes how Hardy excels in the creation of atmosphere and mood through natural description, particularly through descriptions of Wessex at different times of day and night. He remarks on the weird and fateful quality of such descriptions as well as on similar qualities in characters like Diggory Venn, and the use of symbolic coincidence in the plots of the novels. Hardy is not, then, condemned by Duffin for his deviations from realism; on the contrary, he considers this 'use of the marvellous', as he calls it, as highly original and an important feature of Hardy's artistic method. Duffin even goes so far as to describe Hardy as 'a master of mystery in a distinctly new and fascinating way' and adds that he has brought in the 'powerful support of his art to reinforce the natural magic of life' (p.126). Again, in the critical response to nature, we see an early twentieth century critic articulating what later critics took to be their own 'discovery' - that Hardy's novels incorporate many elements usually associated with 'the romance' rather than 'the novel'.<sup>28.</sup>

In his Preface to The House of the Seven Gables,<sup>29.</sup> Hawthorne says of the Novel that it is:

presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity,  
not merely to the possible, but to the  
probable and ordinary course of man's  
experience. (p.1)

The Romance, on the other hand, while it must never 'swerve aside from the truth of the human heart' need not be so faithful to the 'everyday' aspects of life. The Romance writer may:

So manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. (p.1)

And, importantly, he states that the distortions in the mirror must not be too gross when he suggests that the Romance writer should:

.....mingle the marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public. (p.1)

Thus Hawthorne advocates not something completely fabulous and unreal but something similar to what Hardy's novels actually show - the strange emanating from the ordinary and real. At the end of his Preface, Hawthorne claims that The House of The Seven Gables should be read as a Romance because it has:

..... a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex . (p.3)

Hardy did not go quite so far as this in his directives about reading his fiction but he did call Wessex 'that partly real, partly dream, country' which suggests that he was more akin to the Romance writer than the Novelist, as defined by

Hawthorne and, more recently, by Chase:

Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical and symbolistic forms. (p.13)

In the last chapter we saw that Havelock Ellis, in his 1883 Westminster Review article, suggested the importance of the instinct of sex in Hardy's novels. This point is further developed by Arthur Symons in his book on Hardy when he writes of the deep concern in all Hardy's work with the principle of life itself,

.....invisibly realised as Sex, seen visibly in the world as what we call Nature. (p.6)

Hardy's feeling for nature is, in Symons's view, primitive and base rather than poetic and visionary and is undoubtedly linked with sex and other aspects of human nature and instinct. He puts it this way:

No-one has ever studied so scrupulously as Hardy the effect of emotion on inanimate things, or has seen emotion so vividly in people. (p.52)

One might have hoped for fuller discussion of this aspect of nature in Hardy's novels, of the way in which he responds to notions of the survival of the fittest through the treatment of nature and human nature. There are many instances in the novels where nature is shown to be, as Tennyson puts it, 'so careful of the type' and yet 'so careless of the single life'.<sup>30.</sup>



The cruelty of nature is never mentioned by critics in this period; although there is frequent reference to Schopenhauer as a possible influence on the pessimism, there is nothing explicit about the impact of a writer like Darwin on Hardy's conception of nature or on his art as a whole. In this respect there is no change from the response of the Victorian critics who also failed to recognise the importance of scientific ideas to Hardy's novels.

Critics prefer to view Wessex as a timeless Garden of Eden where homely folk live and work and continue the tradition of the Shakespearian peasant or the rustics of Wordsworth. Such a vision of nature and the rural community as providing spiritual comfort and contact with our heritage leads, unfortunately, to Hardy himself being too closely identified with its concerns. Writing of the fatalism in the natural descriptions in The Return of the Native, Samuel Chew says of Hardy:

Though his mind has been impregnated with modern ideas, his temperament is essentially rustic, primitive, pagan.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, not only is Wessex a world apart from the pressures of modern life, but Hardy himself is a novelist at odds with his age. Such a comment as Chew's prefigures what was to become a common view of Hardy as man and artist in the later twentieth century.

There is much admiration for Hardy's skills as a recorder of traditional folk-lore, superstitions and occupations, particularly as those customs he describes recede even further into the

distance. This is connected with the desire to have contact with the rural past which leads critics to idealise Wessex in a way Hardy never does. J. W. Beach, writing in 1922 takes this view. He quotes a passage of rustic dialogue and remarks that,

It implies a regard for the human soul itself irrespective of social position, material possessions, intellectual attainments, and such-like irrelevant circumstances which, if we are to believe our Wordsworth and our Hardy, characterise English humanity, 'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'. The very farm hands approach one another with a high and simple dignity worthy of patriarchs and shepherd-kings "in the early ages of the world". 32.

This kind of critical comment is fairly typical of the period and is echoed by Wright, who has much to say about Hardy's presentation of 'the true romance of country life', and by Virginia Woolf:

The peasants are the great sanctuary of sanity, the country the last stronghold of happiness. When they disappear, there is no hope for the race. (p.190)

There is, then, a wide measure of agreement amongst post-Victorian critics about Hardy's depiction of nature, landscape and Wessex. The tendency to compare Wessex with Dorset or to judge the rustics according to the veracity of their dialect has diminished. In fact, rather the opposite is the case since most of the critics in this period emphasise only the poetic and symbolic qualities of landscape and see the rustics as having a choric function. They seem oblivious to the fragility of the

rural peace, to indications of tension within the community and evidence of change. There is also, as I have suggested, no recognition of how treatment of the natural might be seen as a response or accommodation of Darwinian ideas of natural selection and survival of the fittest. The cruelty of nature is simply not noticed. Nature's mysteries and particularly the way in which the depiction of landscape reflects fate and the supernatural, are more fully realised by critics and some show they are very much aware of the atmosphere, or as Johnson puts it 'the spirit of place' which Hardy conveys. They do, however, almost always see this spirit as something Wordsworthian and beneficent - it is as if there is a deliberate, if unconscious, disregard for a less tender vision of the world.

### (III) The Art of Hardy's novels

As we have seen, Hardy's thought was most often discussed as if it were separate from the body of his novels; sometimes this was because the critic found it unintegrated and sometimes because he felt it was worthy of systematic investigation. Nature and the role of Wessex were also usually discussed rather separately and because commentary on them bulks large in criticism of this period they deserved separate consideration in this study. Within the rather broad heading 'The art of Hardy's novels' it is intended to examine general assessments of his 'place' in the development of the novel form and his particular contribution to it. Also under discussion will be attitudes in this period to the structure of his novels, his plots, characters and his style - all of which preoccupied these post-Victorian critics.

Firstly, however, the overall perspective of Hardy as a novelist is still one in which he is seen as moving away from the Victorian novel towards a more scientific method of novel-writing. He is still frequently compared with Eliot and Meredith; Lionel Johnson's comment is that:

The modern novel of today, in all its phases and developments, seems in my judgement to begin with the work of George Eliot: the more ancient novel to end with the work of Thackeray. In reading George Eliot I am led to think about her successors, and in no slight degree about Mr. Hardy. (p.174)

What makes Hardy and George Eliot 'modern' is their concentration on 'the complication' of emotions. There is no clear sense of right and wrong and introspection is the key mood. Both novelists also deal with the conflict between old and new ways of life and changes in man's conception of nature and society. In Johnson's view, Hardy's work is central in moving the art of the novel in this new direction:

The novelist's art, then, is a serious art: at the present time, it is not easy to be a serious novelist in the right way. The aim of the novel, as in all artistic works, is pleasure: but pleasure is not another name for amusement, although it is clearly not another name for instruction. (p.175)

Johnson's dictum sums up the prevalent attitude to the art of the novel in criticism of this period. There were declarations of this sort in the reviews and articles prior to publication of Johnson's book, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Almost all these late nineteenth and early twentieth century critics wish to elevate the status of fiction and see Hardy as a prime mover

in the process. Just as Hardy's abstractions and his philosophical tendencies in general were often seen as adding seriousness and depth, and his portrayal of nature and countrylife to add poetic beauty, so the construction of his novels is praised for being aesthetically satisfying and worthy of the unities of drama. These critics have little time for the 'ragged edges' of novels where the untidiness of life is reflected in the art, they want tidiness and shape, as in a sculpture. This emphasis on dramatic form shows Jamesian influence, an influence most clearly expressed in Percy Lubbock's, The Craft of Fiction (1921):<sup>33</sup>,

So far from losing ourselves in the world of the novel, we must hold it away from us, see it all in detachment, and use the whole of it to make the image we seek, the book itself. (p.4)

All through the criticism of this period there is the same insistence on the novel as aesthetic object and the same interest in the skill with which the whole has been put together from the parts - hence the separation of all the different 'technical' elements. Again Lubbock expresses this most articulately:

The business of criticism in the matter of fiction seems clear, at any rate. There is nothing more that can usefully be said about a novel until we have fastened upon the question of its making and explored it to some purpose. (p.272)

But Lubbock also acknowledges the inadequacy of critical writing in respect of 'the craft of fiction':

In all our talk about novels we are hampered and held up by our unfamiliarity with what is called their technical aspect, and that is consequently the aspect to confront. (p.272)

While no critic in the period now under examination can truly be said to confront the 'technical aspect' in the way Lubbock means, there is in Hardy criticism a movement towards investigation of how a novel is constructed and how it 'works'.

According to Johnson, it is the consummate skill with which Hardy builds his novels that assures their success. He writes of their 'architectural quality' (p.44) and of the way in which Hardy makes...

.....each work in the phrase, each phrase in the sentence, each sentence in the paragraph, each paragraph in the chapter, each chapter in the book, do its definite work. (p.44)

He concludes that 'this unity of effect is, in my own judgement, the distinction of Mr. Hardy'. (p.45)

Admiration of Hardy's workmanship and of his grand designs, causes Johnson, along with most other critics of the period, to set The Return of the Native above all other of Hardy's novels. Later twentieth century critics have tended to view it as over-constructed; the heath symbolism is seen as rather overpowering and the characters somewhat wooden. Michael Millgate's<sup>34</sup> view is fairly representative:

The difficulty about Egdon is the way in which it perpetually threatens to move from background to foreground, to claim an importance and significance which, dramatically, it does not possess.....(p.131)

and his overall view is that it is an eccentric novel:

Hardy's errors here are of proportion, of rhetorical decorum. Essentially, they derive from sheer ambition, a determination to thrust the novel towards literary distinction not only as a work of art but as in some degree.....a work about art. (p.133)

What Millgate sees as flaws are proof of Hardy's achievement in the eyes of these earlier critics. J. W. Beach,<sup>35</sup> like Johnson, singles out The Return of the Native as the peak of Hardy's artistic career, regarding it as the first of his novels to give shape to a dramatic idea; for him the novel is 'organic' and 'compelling' and he goes on.....

.....the whole course of the story was conceived by the author in terms suggestive of physics and dynamics. (p.94)

For Beach The Return of the Native is the equal of The Egoist; both novels were published in the same year - 1878 - and both prefigure for him the Jamesian technique:

.....in which the relation is very clear between the formal neatness and the predominance of a single theme. (p.89)

This kind of fiction is seen by Beach as an advance on the paraphernalia of farce, melodrama, accidents and misunderstandings that beset the Victorian novel as exemplified by the work of Dickens. Thus, for Beach, Hardy is a pioneer of modern, scientific techniques in fiction and nowhere more so than in The Return of the Native. Tess, though a powerful story, is less well regarded because it is flawed by its melodrama, which makes its appeal too popular, and The Woodlanders is passed over by Beach for its 'bungled narrative'.

Phelps<sup>36.</sup> too, considers The Return of the Native as Hardy's greatest contribution to literature and he likens it to the work of Scott, George Eliot and Meredith. He praises 'the architectonics of his (Hardy's) literary structures' while another critic, Charles Whibley,<sup>37.</sup> describes The Return as 'that great masterpiece'. Edward Wright<sup>38.</sup> refers to Hardy specifically as the author of The Return of the Native and focuses on its structure and proportion in design as one of its main attributes, along with the dramatic skill shown. Hardy's contribution to the development of the English novel is great and Wright summarises it thus:

.....the English novel in Mr. Hardy's hands has become a well-knit drama instead of the string of episodes which once it was. (p.347)

Critic after critic repeats this view of Hardy as a master of construction and design in his novels and as one who moved the novel away from what is, at this time, perceived to be typically Victorian. The form of Hardy's novels is described almost exclusively in terms of drama, architecture or science. Melodrama is condemned as courting popular taste, as being too low a pleasure for an art so serious as novel-writing; also often condemned are didacticism and philosophical speculation which is not part of the dramatic design. From these comments on Hardy's novels as structures we can see how strong a hold Jamesian novel theory had gained on the critical fraternity. Hardy's plots are generally criticised adversely for their lack of probability or artificiality much as they were in the earlier period of the reviews. Edward Wright's<sup>39.</sup> comment on *Tess* is representative:



Mr. Hardy's defect is artificiality. Too much machinery is employed in Tess to bring about the catastrophe. (p.360/361)

So is Forster's in Aspects of the Novel:<sup>40</sup>

.....Hardy arranges events with emphasis on causality, the ground plan is a plot, and the characters are ordered to acquiesce in its requirement.....This, as far as I can make out, is the flaw running through Hardy's novels: he has emphasized causality more strongly than his medium permits. (p.100/101)

One or two critics, though, are more receptive to his particular kind of plots. Beach, for instance, comments:

Mr. Hardy loves in plot the fantastic, the surprising, something to strike the imagination. (p.14)

He goes on to say that Hardy's art is a compromise between the popular and the literary and explains the 'clumsy' plotting, the sensation, and the melodrama, as being what the audience wanted. Hardy is praised for not abandoning his reading public in the name of 'art' as Henry James and George Moore had done. This method of accounting for certain, less acceptable elements of Hardy's fiction is rather suspect but it is important here that Beach is not actually condemning Hardy for being 'popular'. Most critics at this time, in their zeal for raising the status of the novel, denigrate the more popular elements of fiction. One is put in mind of Forster's 'Yes - oh dear yes- the novel tells a story', and his view of story as 'the lowest and simplest of literary organisms', the 'tapeworm' of the novel.<sup>41</sup> Hardy's own view, of course, was rather different; his comment about the

importance of story is relevant here:

A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman.<sup>42</sup>

By suppressing those elements of the art of Hardy's novels which they do not favour, many critics in this period present him as a technician and innovator. The awkward areas are quite clearly plot and story, and melodrama and sensation, which are out of favour with this new generation of critics. Hardy is still most often likened as a novelist to Meredith, though Hardy's reputation is higher than his by now. As Forster comments on Meredith:

.....he will never be the spiritual power he was about the year 1900. His philosophy has not worn well.<sup>43</sup>

And Phelps,<sup>44</sup> comparing the two, describes them as 'two giants' but considers Hardy 'a great novelist' whereas Meredith was merely 'a great man who wrote novels'.

Two further areas which caused these early twentieth century critics some problems were Hardy's characters and his style and language. The way in which some of them approach characterisation in the novels tells us much about their attitudes to life and occasionally something about their attitudes to Hardy's art. A confusion between people in life and characters in a novel is particularly noticeable in the comments on Hardy's women. All

kinds of preconceptions and moral judgements, inappropriate to the fictional world in which the characters exist, are brought to bear on their conduct.

For example, Duffin,<sup>45</sup> who was so perceptive about the mysterious qualities of Hardy's descriptions of nature, betrays only ignorance in this comment on Eustacia Vye, whom he describes as:

.....a woman who lives to love, and to love in a hot, blind, lustful way - not necessarily an animal way, but a way that leads to 'anything in trousers', even to Wildeve. (p.17)

His comment is more than a statement of Eustacia's passionate nature, it implies a judgement on her conduct, as does his later remark that the encounter of Mrs. Yeobright and Eustacia by the pool is 'an indictment of the incredible unreasonableness women can exhibit when occasion offers' (p.21). A similar judgement is also made of Tess, who is described by Duffin as being like her mother, 'pretty, ignorant and easily moved'. Marty South is Hardy's only flawless heroine for Duffin, her passivity and capacity for endurance are approved of - as they are by other critics at this time.

Duffin's treatment of Hardy's women as if they were subject to moral standards and standards of femininity approved by him, is not unusual for this period, he is merely more blatant about expressing his own views. Samuel Chew<sup>46</sup> maintains that all the women in the novels are impulsive and show a common failure to stand firm against external influences. Grace Melbury exhibits 'characteristic feminine indecision' and Bathsheba Everdene is:

The best representative of Hardy's belief in a woman's inability to press steadily towards the goal that she has set before her. (p.37)

Phelps<sup>47</sup> too, writes of Hardy's women being easily swayed by passion, of Hardy being unable to draw 'a truly spiritual woman'; he adds:

Hardy's heroines change their minds oftener than they change their clothes. (C.H. p.402)

Such comments show an inability on the part of some critics to consider Hardy's women characters as literary creations; they write about them as if they had just met them in the street and did not approve of them. Nor is it simply a case of their saying that Hardy portrays women in this or that manner; their own prejudiced ideas and opinions about the female character emerge quite clearly in the comments. Arabella, in Jude the Obscure, attracts some of the worst opprobrium; Duffin calls her 'sex incarnate' and Chew thinks she represents the Schopenhauerian 'will to live' and embodies the very worst in woman.

However, some discussions of Hardy's women are more helpful.

Beach<sup>48</sup> admires Bathsheba as the first of a series of 'independent Shakespearian women', thus making a literary comparison rather than passing judgement on a female type. The same more specifically artistic assessment also applied to his comments on Eustacia. She is described as,

.....a wonderful creation, a poetic invention of strange exotic beauty, fit to be the wicked queen of tragedy. (p.207)

Arthur Symons perceives that the instinctual qualities of Hardy's heroines are central to his conception of the art of the novel. He cites the restless desire of Eustacia as the most impressive example of what Hardy is capable of achieving. In fact he describes her as, 'one of the greatest achievements of modern fiction', and likens her to the women characters in Balzac, Meredith and Tolstoy. Here we see Symons at the opposite extreme from those critics who apply moral criteria in their assessment of Eustacia. Praise for Hardy's portrayal of Eustacia is now decidedly less fulsome because, as also with the portrayal of Egdon, her character is considered rather contrived and it is thought that she carries too heavy a weight of symbolism to be quite convincing. But, most important in this period, is the division between those who judge Hardy's characters (particularly the women) as if they were real people and those who see them as symbols or types. Symons as a symbolist poet and a great admirer of French fiction, can pay Hardy no higher compliment than when he likens his work to that of the French novelists in its frankness and says that as an author he has, 'a fearful and wonderful knowledge of the hearts of women'.

Lionel Johnson too, as befits his poetic stance, has a less literal idea of what constitutes characterisation in fiction - as we shall see - but so far as the female characters are concerned he shows a marked preference for the gentle and passive women. He much admires Anne Garland (The Trumpet Major) and Marty South (The Woodlanders) although he can see the power of a character like Eustacia:

.....seldom has a woman's impatient craving for the fullness of life, and the freedom of action, been so set down in words. (p.211)

Lascelles Abercrombie also admires Anne Garland but, like Johnson and Symons, he realises that this is a preference rather than a literary judgement. He appreciates that Hardy was trying to show more than an external and superficial side to character, as is shown when he writes of Sue Bridehead being more than the 'strange creature' she appears to be on the surface:

Without doubt, Sue's character is the subtlest and most exciting achievement of Hardy's psychological imagination. (p.64)

D. H. Lawrence's championing of Arabella shows his preoccupation with vitality. He sees Sue as sexless and therefore life-denying, whereas Arabella, although he realises she is meant to be rather low and animal, draws from him this comment:

.....at least let acknowledgement be made to her great female force of character. (p.106)

Thus it would seem from the conflicting views of Hardy's women characters that, in addition to some critics failing to treat them as fictional creations, those who do assess them artistically have very different expectations of characters in fiction. Amongst those whose comments have any value as literary criticism there is a strong tendency to over-estimate a 'symbolic' character like Eustacia; this is in accord with the general preference for an artistically self-conscious and highly structured work like The Return of the Native. Symons and Johnson both belong with this section of critics.

Abercrombie, however, picks out something important when he writes of Sue as a psychological study; in this he anticipates the direction of criticism, as well as of literature as a whole, towards an interest in the psychological aspects of characterisation in fiction. Lawrence, too, although his comments are idiosyncratic, anticipates the dawning realisation of critics of the importance of sexual attraction in the Hardy world.

The fact remains, however, that most of the early twentieth century critics have a rather confused idea of how to approach not only characterisation in general but Hardy's characters in particular. Their criticism of the men characters, though less prone to the outright prejudice shown in some remarks on the women, is rarely illuminating. Both men and women, when accepted to be inventions rather than transposed from life, are considered as components in an overall aesthetic plan. The characters are grouped according to type, in terms of strength and weakness, or impulsiveness and passivity, or even according to class or social type.

Of the men characters, there is the same predilection on the part of critics for praising them for qualities conventionally associated with manliness. Just as Anne Garland and Marty South conform to a female stereotype so Henchard, Oak and Winterborne are most highly thought of for their strength and the two latter for being 'strong silent types'. Jude and Angel Clare are thought to be weak-willed and lacking in moral fibre and Alec d'Urberville and Sergeant Troy are criticised for being stagey and 'flat'. This last point is more specifically a literary issue and deserves some comment. We tend to associate the

business of flat and round characters with Forster's Aspects of the Novel where he maintains that we ought to see more than the surface of a character; the novelist must reveal the 'hidden life' below the surface. By this we understand that we are to get to know the emotional, spiritual, and psychological aspects of character in the course of the novel. This assumption, that flat characters do not reveal their 'hidden life' is one which sticks to criticism of the novel for some decades after Forster's book. Yet it is interesting that Forster himself, in Aspects of the Novel, questions his own thesis:

Those who dislike Dickens have an excellent case. He ought to be bad. He is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit. (p.79)

One or two comments about Hardy's characters in this period show evidence of critical insight in trying to place them in a wider framework than that of either symbol or real person. The emphasis on low class characters is picked out by Duffin as being important for the tragedy of the novels. In his novels Hardy can show the grandeur and beauty of the soul of a haytrusser or a school teacher and this has:

.....gone some way to disprove Bradley's assertion that Hamlet's emotions could not have happened to a plumber. (p.82)

Johnson too is, as usual, more wide-ranging in his points of reference than many critics. He sees Hardy's characters as having the strength and directness of those we meet in the poetry



of Wordsworth, but their feelings are complex enough to make them belong also to the modern age. This complexity often conflicts with their simple pagan severity and leads to tragedy. Hardy's men and women are also seen by Johnson as connected through passion in an original way. Tess and Angel, for instance, are both struggling away from their respective social backgrounds, and:

.....the two natures, breaking with the past, came together, she straining towards his level of thought, he stooping to her level of life: the result was a tragic discord. (p.189)

Something of the tragic and elemental quality of Hardy's characters is also conveyed in Virginia Woolf's<sup>50</sup> comments; she says of them:

We do not know them in and out and all round as they are revealed to the casual caller, to the Government official, to the great lady, to the general on the battle-field. We do not know the complication and involvement and turmoil of their thoughts. (p.192)

But, she says, this is because Hardy is not that kind of novelist and she continues:

If we do not know his men and women in their relations to each other, we know them in their relations to time, death, and fate. (p.193)

The conclusion of this is Virginia Woolf's claim that Hardy is 'the greatest tragic writer among English novelists' (p.193).

Thus there is clearly a view of Hardy as a tragic novelist whose characters must be seen as something other than social and moral beings. Although in this period there is little consideration of the interaction between the characters and their environment, the tragic perspective taken by Johnson, Woolf and others, bends a little in this direction. Certainly Johnson's study, written as it was in 1894, is most sensitive to the poetic and dramatic qualities of the novels. Richard Taylor, in a recent article on Hardy's critics<sup>51</sup>, assesses his contribution thus:

Johnson laid the foundation stone of the Hardy industry in a remarkably balanced first study that immediately apprehends the poetic nature of Hardy's Wessex and the importance of the choric characters in support of the tragic protagonists. (p.240)

Although it is clear from the criticism of this period that some critics are moving away from the idea that characters in novels should be treated as if they had just been transposed from life, there is no clear idea of how a critic should discuss characterisation. Most critical writing in this late nineteenth and early twentieth century period is explanatory rather than exploratory so that there are occasional general flashes of insight about Hardy's methods but no really sustained argument or analysis. This works against the discussion of characters because it is easy for the critic to describe their traits, compare and contrast them but never to really get to characterisation rather than character study. Partly, I think, this leisurely approach accounts for the low level of most debate on character but there is also the added problem for the critics of not knowing how or where to place Hardy's characters. His way of portraying people in his novels is different from that

of any other novelist; they are so clearly defined socially and economically and yet so elusive. Treating them as if they were like characters in a George Eliot novel, as if their manners and morals mattered, is clearly inadequate, but so is the tendency to elevate them into symbols or tragic heroes and heroines. When Virginia Woolf says that 'we know them in their relations to time, death, and fate' she is right, but we know them also in relation (if not to each other) to the narrator and the authorial voice that guides us through the novels. No critic in this period touches on point of view or authorial position in the novels and this seems to be why the criticism of Hardy's characters is less satisfactory than it could be. Perhaps Percy Lubbock's remarks from The Craft of Fiction (1921)<sup>52</sup> had not had their effect as yet:

The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view - the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story. (p.251)

Where critics comment about Hardy's style in this period they tend to confine themselves to rather unspecific generalisations about it. Annie MacDonell describes it as 'robust, strong and sincere', for instance, and Abercrombie talks of its being 'kinetic' rather than 'potential'. There are some criticisms, as there were in the reviews, of his grammatical inaccuracies (split infinitives, faulty sentence-structure) and some comments about the rustic dialogue - though as far as that is concerned most critics are happy with the compromise between dialect and standard English. Duffin compares Hardy's style with that of Meredith and decides in Hardy's favour because Meredith, for all his polish, wrote superficially, while Hardy's style is more 'an

emanation of the mind'. Generally speaking the critics are more ready, in this period, to accept that, as Johnson put it, 'a novel is not a phonograph'. Hardy's use of a poetic method is more readily appreciated.

However, there is one really innovative and interesting article on Hardy's style in this period and one which is still influential today; this is Vernon Lee's on Tess in her 1923 book, The Handling of Words.<sup>53</sup> Her approach to investigating style is an early attempt at practical criticism and, although it is rather clumsy, is very thought-provoking. She takes a passage from Tess,<sup>54</sup> analyses it and concludes that:

'the expression tallies with the thought;  
and it is the thought itself which is  
redundant and vague.' (p.224)

She maintains that Hardy includes in the passage information which has nothing to do with the subject in hand and which is merely one example of his constant interruptions into the story of Tess with self-indulgent recollections and pieces of extraneous information - the geological formation of the landscape for example. Lee also notes what she considers to be an inappropriate image, that of Tess on the Egdon slopes being likened to 'a fly on a billiard table of indefinite length'. Lee remarks of this:

.....if, at the instant of writing, he were feeling the variety, the freshness of a valley, he would not be comparing it to a piece of cloth, with which it has only two things in common; being flat and being green; the utterly dissimilar flatness and greenness of a landscape and that of a billiard table. (p.227)

She assumes also that the image is a result of lack of concentration, 'slackened interest' on Hardy's part and that this image is symptomatic of the 'lazy writing' of the passage as a whole. While one would not disagree that the image is a strange one there is one aspect of it which Lee forgets - that it is intended to give an impression of Tess' insignificance (the fly) in the game (billiards?) of the gods, fate or whatever. She never asks whether the image is effective in this sense since she is too preoccupied with its failure to be 'natural'. I do not wish to become involved here in whether or not the image works, but it is certainly worth pointing out that Lee may be approaching the image in a rather limited way. She feels the visual incongruity, the unnaturalness of the image and is outraged in rather the way that some people are outraged by abstract art and assume that it is of less merit and value because it is not harmonious and 'natural'. In the particular passage from Tess she chooses to analyse, 'the variety' and 'the freshness' of valley are perhaps less important to Hardy than the sense of impending doom he wishes to convey. Such an image, which starkly underscores Tess' insignificance, would (and does in my view) convey just this.

It is interesting that having criticised Hardy for his sloppy writing in the passage as a whole she goes on to add that such lazy imprecise language lends itself to the dominant impression of dreamy, sensual life among lush vegetation:

The woolly outlines, even the uncertain drawing, merely add to the impression of primeval passiveness and blind, unreasoning emotion; of inscrutable doom and blind, unfeeling fate which belong to his whole outlook on life. (p.240-241)

The catalogue of Hardy's faults as a stylist is suddenly transformed into the hallmark of his greatness:

And the very faults of Hardy are probably an expression of his solitary and matchless grandeur of attitude. He belongs to a universe transcending such trifles as Writers and Readers and their little logical ways. (p.241)

Thus it can be seen from Lee's reading of Hardy's style that what seems inappropriate and incorrect language and imagery is not necessarily so. Conventional notions of exactness and probability are as little relevant to Hardy's style as they are to his plots, characters, or his philosophical preoccupations. Virginia Woolf's comment expresses the same feeling of paradox about Hardy's style as Vernon Lee's:

Before such power as this we are made to feel that the ordinary tests which we apply to fiction are futile though. Do we insist that a great novelist shall be a master of melodious prose? Hardy was no such thing.....No style in literature, save Scott's, is so difficult to analyse; it is on the face of it so bad, yet it achieves its aim so unmistakably. (p.195)

The problem of Hardy's style - its dreadful unevenness, its convolutions and imprecisions and yet its suitability for his purposes as an artist - has continued to be the subject of critical debate. As recently as 1980 Richard Taylor<sup>55</sup> writes:

His idiosyncracies of style still need to be properly related to the total experience of reading Hardy.....(p.250)

Even so notable a critic as David Lodge has ultimately failed to come to terms with Hardy's style. In his Tess, Nature and The Voices of Hardy<sup>56</sup> he reveals some anomalies in Vernon Lee's position and points to the several 'voices' used by Hardy to add density to his novels. This, he says, leads to confusion of purpose in Hardy's art but he too, comes to the conclusion that somehow the awkwardnesses of the style are part of its overall impressiveness:

Hardy is a peculiarly difficult novelist to assess because his vices are almost inextricably entangled with his virtues..... Alternately dazzled by his sublimity and exasperated by his bathos, false notes, confusions, and contradications, we are, while reading him, tantalised by a sense of greatness not quite achieved.....(pp.187/188)

Of all the difficulties faced by critics writing on Hardy's novels, the problem of his style has proved the most intractable; Vernon Lee's article, though written at a time when close analysis was almost unheard of, is as perceptive as any more recent study. The methods of practical criticism have not been very satisfactory in explaining Hardy's power as a novelist, perhaps because our preconceptions about what constitutes a good style are not appropriate to Hardy's art, rather than that his writing is at fault.

Overall then, the most important feature of the criticism of Hardy's novels in this period, and the one which informs almost all other features is the seriousness with which the novel is treated as an art form.

This, as we saw, stemmed from James but unlike him most of the critics here are unable to recognise that the novel must have a certain fluidity, must not be bound by rules. Most critics in his period apply the rules and standards of other art forms - poetry, painting, architecture, drama - to the novels of Hardy. A novel like The Return of the Native thus emerges as superior to Tess because it conforms to the standards set; it is philosophical and serious it has a grand architectural design with unity of place, time and action and counterpointing of types of character; it also treats landscape and nature poetically and symbolically and aspires to be a tragedy in the scope of its action. In discussions The Return of the Native is frequently likened to French fiction on its symbolic side and to a drama for its tragedy. Tess has melodramatic qualities which are frowned upon as too close to the old frivolous conception of the novel as akin to music hall entertainment. Alec d'Urberville is 'stagey' and Tess herself is too like the stereotyped maiden of love and legend. There is too much sensationalism in the working out of the plot of Tess and too many accidents and coincidences which do not conform to early twentieth century notions of unity and proportion in novels. It was these same preconceptions about the high seriousness of the novel form which led to Thackeray, Trollope and especially Dickens being seriously underrated in the earlier part of this century; in a wider sense it is, in turn, part of a reaction against Victorianism which is evident in Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians.

Because there is so much stress on Hardy's novels as art, there is little recognition of their value as a record of or response to changes of an historical and social kind. These critics see



him as a recorder of quaint lost customs rather than, as one critic has put it more recently, a writer whose work 'treats in imaginative form of the defeat of our peasantry and the collapse of our agriculture'.<sup>57</sup> In fact, most critics at this time see Wessex as 'dream country' rather than as the 'real country' that those before them saw it as.

Most critics at this time also seem unsure about how to approach characterisation in novels. They tend to draw character sketches or to compare one character with another or, at worst, to pass judgements on their personality and actions quite independently of their context in the novel itself. There is not much sense of the importance of a novel as a living world at all; where it is looked at as separate from life it is seen as if it were static and fixed, like a sculpture, not a representation of something more amorphous. The point of view of the author or implied author to the characters is never really raised at all, nor is the subject of the main characters' relationships with one another which are usually ones of passionate love or hatred. The effect of heredity, fate and environment on character and action is occasionally commented on in a vague way in referring to the doom and tragedy of Hardy's outlook but there is hardly ever any detailed discussion.

All this shows, I think, that novel criticism was still (as it is even now) feeling its way forward, over-dependent on the methods and standards of judgement of other art forms and other disciplines, particularly philosophy. The period about to be discussed (1930-1950) shows far more rapid development of criticism as a discipline, and particularly of criticism of the novel, but it has

not the virtues of the criticism of this post-Victorian period. It is rare, for instance, to encounter the kind of criticism of Lionel Johnson, which Stanford described as 'so eminently literative in itself'. The elegance and the urbanity of the style and tone of the man of letters have more or less disappeared by 1930. This disappearance is symptomatic of the loss of a whole more leisured and leisurely way of life and of looking at life.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### CRITICISM FROM 1930 to 1950

Just as critics in the immediately post-Victorian period reacted against solidly Victorian preconceptions about the novel, so in this period there is a reaction against late Victorian and early 20th century critical assumptions. For two important reasons it seemed most appropriate to deal with the criticism of the thirties and forties more or less chronologically rather than to examine it thematically. Firstly, there is a gradual shift in critical emphasis in this period; adopting a chronological approach has meant that the pattern of development can be more clearly charted. Secondly, much of the criticism appears in the form of magazine articles or write-ups of lectures, so that there is an air of immediacy and of debate about it as one critic responds to the work of another. If the criticism is not treated chronologically, the liveliness of the debate is in danger of being lost and the attitudes of appearing more fixed and static than they were.

A number of intellectual and historical influences lead to changed perceptions of Hardy's fiction in the period 1930-1950. The impact of psychological theories is felt on literary criticism; this is most obvious in America where the impact of The New Criticism and the general professionalisation of criticism are also more evident than in Britain. In this period criticism emerges as an academic discipline rather than a kind of hobby practised by creative writers, men of letters and amateur philosophers. Malcolm Bradbury has fairly summed up the climate which emerged with the New Criticism:

New Criticism especially represented three things: it marked the movement of criticism into the academy and out of the context of general thought; it established criticism as a serious form of educative study, based not on scholarship but the intensive reading of major texts; and it encouraged critical democratization by making appreciation and competence dependent not on the 'possession' of taste but on effective training.<sup>1</sup>

While close reading of texts, 'practical criticism' and literary criticism as an academic discipline could also be seen emerging in Britain during this period, the climate is rather different. There is less emphasis on criticism as an objective and scientific study and more upon its responsibility to relate values in literature to those in life, and upon its position within our culture as a whole. To some extent this is a nineteenth century inheritance; the moral tone of the reviewers and early critics still reverberates in British criticism of this period - as it does even today. But the tone and the tenor of British criticism were also set by particular individuals - Eliot and Leavis are the most prominent - and, in no small measure, by one magazine, Scrutiny, (1932-1953) whose dominance runs right through this period. The critical inflexibility of Eliot, and Leavis and the Scrutiny team, is largely responsible for the marked disparity in the level of serious critical examination of Hardy's fiction and poetry in the two countries. Patrick Parrinder describes Eliot and Leavis emerging after the Great War 'as critics with a mission to reaffirm the authority of culture.'<sup>2</sup> If this is so, and broadly speaking it seems a fair assessment, then the culture which they wished to reaffirm was not for them represented in or by the works of Thomas Hardy.

However, before turning to that criticism which was most

contentious in its pronouncement it is worth noting that there were some books and articles on Hardy in this period, particularly in the thirties, which may be described as being sound without being really innovative. A. S. McDowall's Thomas Hardy (1931)<sup>3</sup> is described by R. H. Taylor as 'perhaps the most intelligent early study; amateur in the root sense of the word'.<sup>4</sup> I would not rate it quite so highly but it certainly seems to belong with the 'early studies' of the 1920's rather than with the criticism of this period. McDowall sees Hardy as a writer whose work is characterised by its emotional intensity and its sense of tragedy. His view is fairly conventional in that he says the novels 'glare with melodrama' and are too rigidly designed and plotted so that some of the fluidity of life is lost. McDowall's view is close to Lawrence's and Virginia Woolf's view that Hardy's novels convey impressions and emotions rather than providing an analysis or explanation of life; he comments of the novels:

.....with them the novel turns towards the apprehension of life - the feeling, if not the meaning, of it - and the embodiment of it as perceived by an individual sensibility. (p.60)

This has all the hallmarks of the early studies in being an impression of Hardy's fiction unsupported by close study and relying upon vaguely expressed generalisations for its effect. Not only this; it is also applauding exactly the kind of subjective and emotional approach to life and art which, as we shall see, Eliot so despised in After Strange Gods. McDowall's view of Hardy as a writer who has rejected Victorian values and has blended poetry and philosophy to turn the Victorian novel 'in a new and individual direction', is very much the twenties

view and is heard only faintly in the 1930's.

A. P. Elliott's, Fatalism in the Works of Thomas Hardy (1935)<sup>5</sup> is another rather old-fashioned work which analyses Hardy's art in relation to Fate as an artistic motif. This means, in effect, that Elliott deals largely with Hardy's philosophical outlook. He takes the view of several of the twenties critics we looked at, that Hardy cannot be charged with pessimism because such a charge is inconsistent with the value he attached to goodness, truth and beauty in the novels. Elliott blames Hardy's gloom not so much on his own temperament or upon his times, or even upon Schopenhauer, but upon his first wife.

However, Elliott is perceptive about Hardy's use of accident and coincidence; he is one of the first to recognise what is now a commonplace of Hardy criticism - that such devices are intentional. Elliott says that far from being the 'bungling methods of construction' which most critics think them, they are 'purposeful devices born of his way of looking at life'. He also anticipates later critics in insisting that the plots of Hardy's novels are not only a manifestation of his 'philosophy' but also contribute to the artistic effectiveness of the works rather than detracting from it. A further point of Elliott's, about woman being an instrument of fate motivated only by her drive to possess man by seduction and deception, is less well made. It is not so much that he sees woman as a slave to primitive feelings, an agent of 'The Will' (Shaw also conveys this in his work and we do see something of it in Hardy) as the way Elliott allows his prejudices against women to show - as in the comment about Hardy's wife. This tendency to air personal prejudices openly in criticism is largely typical of

an earlier period but we can still see something of it in the criticism of this period - in British more than American criticism.

T. S. Eliot's strictures on Hardy in After Strange Gods<sup>6</sup> bear the stamp of his own personality and beliefs and, it would be fair to say, are not really representative of his true critical ability. Eliot does not offer After Strange Gods as criticism but as a moral judgement on contemporary literature, but if we consider Eliot's own view of the responsibility of criticism, then we have to accept he is expressing here a critical attitude:

Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.<sup>7</sup>

If we bear in mind also the number of critics who have, either directly or indirectly, responded to Eliot's extreme critical stance, then we must take his judgements seriously.

Eliot's thesis in After Strange Gods is that the work of certain modern writers has suffered from an absence of tradition and orthodoxy. The book was published at a time when Eliot was being converted to Anglo-Catholicism and was revising his approach to literature in the light of his conversion. His criticism of Hardy is at the centre of his argument that a lack of settled values and moral stability in culture leads in literature to a highly eccentric and subjective vision being imposed upon the reader. Such extreme subjectivism is a symptom of the state of modern society which is 'worm-eaten by liberalism'; in Hardy's case it further leads to morbid emotionalism and self-indulgence.

To catch the exact tone of Eliot's writing it is worth quoting from the work itself:

The work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs.....He seems to me to have written as nearly for the sake of self-expression as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome matter of communication.....This extreme emotionalism seems to me a symptom of decadence; it is a cardinal point of faith in a romantic age, to believe there is something admirable in violent emotion for its own sake, whatever the emotion or whatever its object. (pp54-55)

The 'violent emotion' Eliot refers to here is that which he sees in Barbara of the House of Grebe - one of Hardy's short stories. It is the only one of Hardy's works he uses to support his argument, and, as J.I.M. Stewart was later to point out,<sup>8</sup> is hardly a representative selection of Hardy's work. Eliot interprets the story as portraying a world of pure evil and considers it to have been written 'solely to provide a satisfaction for some morbid emotion'. In a more general way Eliot attacks Hardy's style, his use of landscape as a vehicle for emotion, and his tendency in his plots to 'give one last turn of the screw himself'. But the crux of Eliot's argument is his concern with 'the intrusion of the diabolic into modern literature' and for this he refers specifically only to Barbara of the House of Grebe. It is interesting that D. H. Lawrence is Eliot's other main target, thus establishing a link between the two writers which had not so far been noted except, of course, by Lawrence himself.

The point made by Eliot in After Strange Gods, that certain

writers have a highly subjective vision of the world which is emotionally orientated and colours their aesthetic vision, is perfectly fair; what is less measured are the conclusions he draws from it. His tone is one of outrage and obsessiveness. The critic, Samuel Hynes, has said of this book and of the criticism of Hardy in particular:

.....one must conclude that what we have here is not so much an act of criticism as a kind of exorcism.<sup>9</sup>

The only good thing to be said of Eliot's criticism, if it may be so-called, is that it acted as a stimulus to other critics who felt compelled to defend Hardy's art against such an attack.<sup>10</sup>

An article which challenges Hardy's established reputation in a more reasoned way is Frank Chapman's Scrutiny essay of 1934,<sup>11</sup> one of a series of revaluations of established writers in the magazine. Chapman is not at all sure that Hardy deserves the high reputation which the twenties critics gave him. Their admiration has led to Hardy's greatness as a writer being rather taken for granted and to his work being the object of 'conventional tribute' rather than 'serious consideration'. Chapman also maintains that Hardy is very much 'an English fad' whose reputation abroad has never been established. While this may be true of Hardy's standing in Europe until very recently,<sup>12</sup> there was certainly some 'serious' interest in his work in America - as our examination of the criticism of earlier periods has shown.<sup>13</sup>

The basis of Hardy's reputation is, according to Chapman, his philosophical outlook, his tragic sense and 'his powers of

characterisation exemplified chiefly in the rustics'. This claim is something of an over-simplification, since neither Hardy's outlook nor his methods of characterisation were unreservedly praised and this praise was certainly not, as Chapman maintains, 'almost unanimous'. Moving on to reassess Hardy's status as a novelist, Chapman observes that Hardy's novels and poems are alike in showing no development; early Hardy contains some of the best much as later Hardy contains some of the worst of his work. Whether Chapman means this as anything more than an observation is hard to say since he does not develop the point. It is surely a rather flimsy critical remark which cannot provide evidence of a writer's status or of his artistic ability.

At the centre of his reassessment of Hardy, Chapman places the question of style. Like the critics of the 1910's and 1920's Chapman thinks that analysis proves it to be 'almost wholly bad' but that it aims at and sometimes achieves 'impressiveness'. He criticises all the usual aspects of Hardy's style, - its 'shows of erudition', the 'heavy, ponderous words', and the stilted dialogue. Chapman notes Hardy's tendency to make literary references but adds:

Yet these references are an integral part of his style, and, irritating as they are, seem typical of him and his naïve ideas of scholarship and education.(p.27)

The tone of this, as well as the content, is patronising in much the same way that the reviewers were often patronising about Hardy as a man and as an artist. We can catch the same tone in other British criticism of this period. For Chapman, Hardy is at his best when he is communicating the rustics'



dialogue; he is a writer who well recognises 'the real value of village life', contrasting it with other modes of life which threaten it. The brilliance of Hardy's portrayal of this traditional way of life being replaced by a new order must, says Chapman, go a long way towards explaining his success; he singles out The Mayor of Casterbridge as Hardy's best novel in this respect.

This point of Chapman's is important and marks the first stage in the shift of critical emphasis which begins in the 1930's. Wessex come to be seen as a dramatisation of a society in the throes of change and development rather than as a timeless back-water where city dwellers might escape for a rest from life. This ultimately leads to the work of critics like Kettle, Brown and Williams in the 1950's<sup>14</sup>, with their emphasis on the economic and social history recorded in Hardy's novels. Important also is Chapman's specific focus on The Mayor of Casterbridge which he describes as Hardy's 'greatest novel', because of its 'sureness of environment'. The Victorian reviewers and the post-Victorian critics more or less ignored The Mayor of Casterbridge, appearing to see no particular merit in the novel. Chapman anticipates many later critics in seeing The Mayor as displaying some of Hardy's best work as a novelist. For him not only the 'sureness of environment' but also the historical relevance of the text set it above other works. This reflects a new concern with the dramatisation of the historical 'moment' in Hardy's fiction.

Chapman's assessment of Hardy's philosophy is that although it is second-rate it is nevertheless central to his work. Noting the lack of any philosophy in Under the Greenwood Tree, Chapman

concludes:

The effect of its absence here serves to show that it was derived from a radical habit of mind, and was something essential to Hardy's organisation. (p.31)

In some of the other novels Hardy achieves a balance; the 'habitual philosophic attitude' stays in the background and lends atmosphere and unity without being too intrusive. But when Hardy brings his philosophy in directly his art 'becomes tedious and unconvincing'.

Hardy's plots are seen by Chapman as faulty and contrived. Unlike Elliott, who saw in the frequent use of change and coincidence a dramatisation of the workings of fate, he sees only 'a long chain of improbable coincidences'. Chapman sees Hardy's plotting, his philosophy and his moral attitudes as those of 'a good Victorian'; for him, George Eliot's attitude is the more modern of the two. Thus Chapman takes the earlier view of Hardy as a progressive novelist and reverses it, arguing that he is a solidly Victorian novelist and thinker:

His very pessimism implies firm and solid positions - there is none of the agonizing doubt and conflict that we find in a man like Lawrence. (p.36)

The same is also said of Hardy's style:

It is obviously the product of a mind which was as firmly convinced about the question of style, as about everything else, and its Victorianism has just the same virtues and limitations as Hardy's Victorian attitudes. (p.36)

Chapman's conclusion is that Hardy's is 'a curiously qualified greatness' but he admits the greatness is there even if it does not lie in those areas which the post-Victorian critics thought it did. Apart from suggesting that the rural environment and the philosophy contribute to that greatness, Chapman is not very specific about the direction reassessment of Hardy's novels should take. He feels the same about Hardy's poems which he refers to as a 'strangely limited achievement'. In this sense his criticism is rather negative but it does, in a general way, clear the lines of thought and provide a fair basis for reassessment of Hardy's art.

A more positive reassessment of Hardy's work came in 1940 with the appearance of a centennial issue of the American periodical Southern Review. This collection of essays on Hardy's novels and poetry marks something of a turning point in criticism of his work, containing as it does some of the most influential essays on it. In fact the Twentieth Century Views collection of essays, published twenty-three years later,<sup>15</sup> contains four of the Southern Review essays among its thirteen contributions.

One of the most stimulating of the essays is M.D. Zabel's Hardy in Defense of his Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity.<sup>16</sup>

Although Zabel falters a little when writing of Hardy's philosophy, for the most part his argument is assured and sincerely felt. He is the first critic to draw to any degree on Hardy's own critical statements about his fiction and this proves very profitable. He maintains that Hardy was a highly conscious artist who has survived as a great writer in spite of 'some of the severest criticism that has been made against an author of

his rank.' While this is something of an exaggeration it is certainly true that few critics had considered Hardy as a conscious and proficient artist. In Zabel's view his greatness has never been adequately explained:

Few readers have missed the spell, and few have missed feeling in some sense confused about it. (p.131)

However, Zabel does not consider that the discordances in Hardy's life, art and thought detract from his greatness - on the contrary - he finds in them 'the basic clue to his talent'. For Zabel, such disunity is 'the frame and condition of modern man's typical agony', and, like Chapman, he sees the question of Hardy's style as central to the wider question of ambiguity in his temperament and his art. Although Zabel's conclusions are rather different from Chapman's they also agree in thinking Hardy has little in common with the work of aesthetic reformers of the novel such as James, Moore or Flaubert. Almost all critics of this period, whatever their perspective, are united in their attempt to dissociate Hardy from the intellectual and self-conscious writers of the late nineteenth century. Zabel maintains that Hardy had ideas about the novel as an art form but that he only formulated them retrospectively because he felt compelled to do so as a defence against the accusations of his having no method or sense of style at all. Hardy's method was initially his own instinctive sense of what was the right way to express his vision but, as Zabel points out, this does not mean it has less value. Zabel pays Hardy the long overdue compliment of assuming that he was, whether consciously or instinctively, practising an art in his novels and not aiming solely to be 'a good hand at a serial'.

Zabel sees Hardy's artistic method as having much to do with his view of art as somehow grasping truths beyond those of the surface of life. So, Hardy's defence of casual vitality in his style and in his art as a whole, can be seen as related to his preference for what Zabel calls 'a magical conception of man and nature'. This accords with Hardy's own view of his novels as 'seemings' or 'impressions'; he did not write the same kind of novels as those of his contemporaries to whom he is most often likened.

Zabel argues the case for Hardy's method well and, broadly-speaking, his defence of Hardy's ideas is convincing. He takes the view that Hardy was not a pessimist - as had others - but is more specific about the reasons. According to Zabel there is positive hope in Hardy's work that the will to live may eventually lead to a victory for man over the forces which control him:

Hardy was, in fact, more than is generally assumed a pioneer defender, with Butler and Shaw, of the creative principle in evolution. (p.138)

Zabel then goes on to liken Hardy's ideas to those of Nietzsche rather than Schopenhauer. He bases the case for their likeness upon their both being post-Darwinian writers whereas Schopenhauer was pre-Darwinian. Both Nietzsche and Hardy believe in the possibility of the ultimate unity of instinct and intellect while Schopenhauer saw the two as quite distinct. Hardy's novels show that man has lost his traditional dignity through knowledge of evolution but has,

survived to declare a new faith and worth for himself through a sublimation of his egoistic individuality into the instinctive wisdom and slowly maturing intelligence of the natural universe itself. (p.141)

This process is illustrated in the fates of characters like Clym Yeobright, Henchard, Jude, Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterborne and Marty South. There is something in what Zabel says but he does not follow it through by close attention to the texts. His ideas remain suspended in mid-air and hence lack force. He is, however, a precursor of critics like John Holloway and J. Hillis Miller<sup>17</sup>. in his recognition of the importance of evolutionary theory to Hardy's conception of the natural and universal scheme.

Zabel's most important contribution to Hardy criticism is his contention that in Hardy's fiction we witness the introduction of poetic method into the novel with all its attendant ambiguities:

There is an essential incongruity in Hardy's world. And he stretched the terms of the incongruity to such a degree that his tales often collapse under the test. (p.143)

It is at this point that Zabel makes the most important statement of his essay. As was noted in the previous chapter earlier critics had hinted at Hardy's symbolic and allegoric qualities but Zabel articulates the significance of this more certainly than any critic before him:

He now appears to us as a realist developing towards allegory - as an imaginative artist who brought

the 19th century novel out of its slavery to fact and its dangerous reaction against popularity, and so prepared the way for some of the most original talents of a new time. (p.148)

Zabel's is not an exhaustive nor a completely convincing argument for Hardy's centrality in the development of the novel, but it is suggestive and seems a more positive response to Hardy's work than, say, Chapman's contention that Hardy was a solidly Victorian writer. Either case could probably be argued but at least Zabel does not patronise Hardy and imply that he wrote 'badly' because he was uneducated. Certainly Zabel's attention to the impact of evolutionary theory on Hardy's art is worthwhile noting too.

Another essay in The Southern Review collection which is innovative and suggestive if not exhaustive is Donald Davidson's The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's Fiction. Davidson agrees with Zabel that although Hardy was writing in a particular literary period and was to some extent influenced by it he was not essentially 'of' that period. Failure to appreciate this has led to almost three generations of critics misunderstanding his work:

The critics had not so much under-rated-or over-rated - Hardy as missed him, in somewhat the same way as, in our opinion, Dr. Johnson missed John Donne. (S.R. p.163)

In addition, Hardy has been unforunate in that those who have written about his work have often been those who had least affinity with it - right from George Meredith to T. S. Eliot.

All this is, of course, rather exaggerated but it provides a suitably dramatic opening for Davidson's claim that we must view Hardy's art in another light. Davidson sees Hardy's technique as close to that of the ballad-maker. In his best novels, as in ballads, action is central; there is none of the psychological probing and accumulation of circumstantial detail that we find in the works of Zola or Flaubert. Davidson notes the severity of critical attitudes to Hardy's use of coincidence and comments:

The logic of the traditional story is not the logic of modern literary fiction. The traditional story admits and even cherishes, the improbable and unpredictable. (p.171)

According to him, Hardy's adherence to the older tradition of story-telling also accounts for the suggestions of mystery and the supernatural in his work. Ballads are full of weird and wonderful figures and events; they also have a strong sense of fate and doom which Hardy's novels have assimilated.

Davidson thinks that the reason for Hardy's objection to being labelled a pessimist may be that he was so steeped in this tradition that he did not realise he was being pessimistic.

Davidson also applies his theory about Hardy's art to his methods of characterisation. He notes that critics have often commented on the lack of development in Hardy's characters but if we see Hardy in the ballad tradition then his fixed characters do not seem at all odd. As he points out, it is only relatively recently that there has arisen an expectation that characters should show psychological development in stories. Davidson



suggests that much of the aesthetic richness of Hardy's novels derives from the interplay between the changeless and the changeful characters. The most prevalent fixed characters in the novels are the rustics about whom Davidson says:

They are the basic pattern to which other characters conform or from which they differ. (S.R. p.176)

This view of Wessex and the rustics as representing a microcosm of average human society was, as we saw, noticed by a critic as early as Lionel Johnson but it was more usual for earlier critics to see them as failing to mirror reality or as a kind of Greek chorus. Davidson relegates the choric function to a position of minor importance, preferring to confer on the rustics the role of representative selection of humanity.

In his general conclusion Davidson returns to his opening point about the critics having 'missed' Hardy and makes a valid criticism of the kinds of approach used. Most critical examination of Hardy has, he says, been imposed from 'without'. Critics ought rather to have been looking more closely at Hardy's own habit of mind and how he applied it in his fiction. Thus Davidson's approach is very similar to Zabel's. Zabel's contention that Hardy was not a realistic or naturalistic writer but one who was moving towards allegory bears affinity with Davidson's view of Hardy as owing much to the ballad tradition. After all many old tales from the oral tradition were allegorical. The two critics are also alike in maintaining that we should attend to Hardy's own methods not those we think he ought to have used; both critics show respect for what Hardy was actually doing in his novels and for what he claimed to be doing. There is

little doubt but that this approach explains much that was thought wrong with his fiction by the Victorian and post-Victorian critics. Elements such as plotting, melodrama, sensation, characterisation, presentation of fate, and storytelling are all reassessed in the light of new perceptions about the art of fiction.

That this reassessment was not one which applied to Hardy alone can be seen from the marked upturn in Dickens's reputation in this period. Dickens's psychological penetration and the hallucinatory qualities of his often nightmarish world suddenly seemed to appeal to the age. What had been seen as his worst faults - flat characters, sentimentality, melodrama, and as with Hardy, improbability - were considered in a new way. Edmund Wilson's Dickens: The Two Scrooges (1940)<sup>18</sup> was a turning point for Dickens criticism, much as the 1940 centennial issue of Southern Review was for Hardy criticism, and there are close similarities between Humphry House's essay The Macabre Dickens (1947)<sup>19</sup> and J. O. Bailey's Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants (1946).<sup>20</sup> When Lauriat Lane Jr., in his introduction to The Dickens Critics,<sup>21</sup> summarises critical responses to Dickens, we can see the likeness to Hardy criticism of the earlier periods. Of Dickens's critics he remarks:

They have condemned him for those of his early works in which he often either relied too fully on the cruder conventions of earlier fiction or gave too much freedom to his own still imperfect genius. They have condemned him for over obvious irony and satire, and clumsy picaresque plots; or for oversimple morality and melodrama, and false emotionalizing and uncontrolled verbal fancy.....Still other critics have set up a limited definition of the novel and by it have determined that Dickens was no novelist and

therefore no artist. They have decided that the novel is not romance but reality, not myth but history; that it is not symbolic but literal and not poetic but prosaic. Hence they would have action always probable, behaviour always explainable in everyday terms; they would have style decorous and restrained, speech the speech of normal men and woman, and characters moved only by the ordinary springs of human behaviour, by the ordinary human desires for fame and fortune, money and matrimony. (p.3)

Although some of the points Lane makes are specific to Dickens, this summary - like Ford's very similar one in Dickens and His Readers<sup>22</sup>, shows that many of the same difficulties and uncertainties about criteria for judging a novel apply to the criticism of both writers. The more one looks into the treatment of the works of Dickens by critics, the more striking the parallels with Hardy criticism are. Both, it would seem, have been condemned for lack of subtlety in characterisation, plot, structure and writing style. 'Probability' is a key word here, since both writers appear to have offended critics most by their improbability and sensationalism - the lack of fidelity to, as Lane puts it, 'the ordinary springs of human behaviour'. Like Dickens, Hardy fits uneasily into the tradition of the realistic novel and critics have found them both equally hard to come to terms with. Ford, writing of Saintsbury's confusion over Dickens, comments:

Saintsbury is an excellent example of a critic with a theory of The Novel and with a concept of reality to which the novelist must conform. If certain novels fail to conform, then they must be abandoned, or reclassified, or clipped into the prescribed shape. A fourth possibility, that the theory might be modified, and a new theory constructed inductively, does not seem to have occurred to this uncommonly lively and perceptive historical critic. (p.231)

The same kind of confusion, arising from an inflexible idea of what the novel should be, has (as we have seen) been only too evident in criticism of Hardy's novels. This inflexibility is not in my view, confined to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but is equally apparent in some later criticism too. However, this remains to be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The general tendency of most of the Southern Review essays is towards revised standards for judging Hardy's work - novels and poetry alike. Davidson and Zabel, as we have seen, open up new horizons for Hardy criticism in their work by stressing the novels as symbolic structures revealing psychological truths. They also focus upon Hardy's portrayal of the absurdity of the human condition and the tragic nature of life. While such revaluation was undoubtedly needed and is to be welcomed there is to such an approach - as always - a less positive aspect. In this case it seems to lie in the way that these critics underplay the impact of historical and intellectual currents on the novels and the importance of intellectual and social history within their framework. Jacques Barzun, in line with Zabel and Davidson, argues for Hardy as something other than a realist; he takes the view that Hardy's closest links are with Romantic poetry and that he should be considered a Gothic artist. This again is a valuable perspective as there are many instances of the gothic in the novels, many of which are harnessed to Hardy's conception of fate and the supernatural and which (in Far From the Madding Crowd particularly) contribute to a unity of atmosphere and mood.

The most notable contributors to Southern Review on Hardy's

poetry are Auden and Leavis. Auden's essay is by way of a tribute to Hardy whom he calls 'my poetical father'. The depth and authenticity of the emotions expressed in Hardy's poetry are what Auden says have most impressed him overall, but he makes a more specific point which is, perhaps, more relevant to Hardy's fiction:

What I valued most in Hardy, then, as I still do, was his hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height, as in the stage directions of The Dynasts, or the opening chapter of The Return of the Native. To see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on the earth, the stars, gives one both humility and self-confidence.<sup>23</sup>

Thus it is the scope and perspective of Hardy's work which Auden values most highly; while critics have, generally speaking, recognised the poetry and grandeur of Hardy's vision they have not so far touched upon one of the most notable fictional techniques, what Auden terms 'his hawk's vision'. The importance of Hardy's narrative stance and this facility of his for using what are now seen as specifically cinematic techniques is thus first brought to our attention by Auden in this essay in 1940, although later critics have expanded upon it more fully.<sup>24</sup>

While Auden claims Hardy as his poetic father, F. R. Leavis presses the case here for reevaluation of Hardy's inflated reputation. His essay is on the poetry but he manages to dismiss Hardy's novels too, in a sentence or two, claiming that he would never have known Hardy was a great novelist unless he had been told. So far as the poetry goes, Leavis declares that only a

handful of them may be called great - a view which, like many of Leavis's, prevailed for many years but which was finally challenged by Philip Larkin when he said that he would not wish The Collected Poems a page shorter.<sup>25</sup>

There are, then, some important (though not always complimentary) critical essays in Southern Review VI, 1940. In introducing my discussion of them I noted that they marked a turning point in Hardy criticism. This is not to say that the criticism before 1940 may be classified as old-fashioned and as in some way inadequate; critics like Zabel, Davidson and Barzun would like us to think that this is the case but the difference is more one of angle of vision than of quality of mind and method.

In contrast to the seemingly professional and systematic approaches of many of the Southern Review essays is David Cecil's Hardy The Novelist (1943).<sup>26</sup> It is a work in the older tradition of impressionistic criticism and, perhaps because it was based on a series of lectures, is highly discursive. If it contains some of the best of the Hardy criticism it also contains some of the worst and rather over-reaches itself by attempting a 'final judgement' on Hardy.

Whether Cecil is responding to the call for reevaluation made by other critics he does not tell us but he must, presumably, have been aware of The Southern Review collection because he takes up the issue of Hardy's debt to the ballad tradition. Cecil adds that Hardy,

.....sees human beings less as individuals than as representatives of a species, and in relation to the ultimate conditioning forces of their existence. His subject is not men, but man. His theme is mankind's predicament in the universe. (p.19)

Here he is in line with Virginia Woolf in seeing Hardy as a poetic and tragic writer who is not concerned with individual psychology nor with manners and morals but with man as part of a larger universal scheme which makes him seem small and unimportant. This view of mankind is, for Cecil, what links Hardy with the traditions of ballad and folklore rather than those of the realistic novel. Man is seen in his novels struggling with an omnipotent and indifferent fate; it is wrong, in Cecil's view, to see the struggle as between man and human institutions - this is of secondary importance. Cecil's view of the women characters is not that they are 'instruments' of fate, a danger to the men, but that they are victims of it because of their passiveness and frailty. Such a blanket coverage of the women is easily contradicted since so many of them clearly are not passive or frail - Arabella, Bathsheba, Eustacia spring immediately to mind. Cecil is very traditional in his objections to Jude the Obscure too; he cannot consider Arabella in an aesthetic sense at all and merely refers to her as an 'odious woman'.

Whatever Hardy's qualities as a writer, Cecil sees his work as being limited in range because of his being the son of humble parents 'only just above the rank of labourer'. This limitation of range is, he says, more noticeable in Hardy than in most other novelists and affects his art adversely. This again seems a dubious argument; after all, Jane Austen's novels are similarly

limited in range but this makes her no less an artist than, say, Tolstoy (whose War and Peace is cited by Cecil as an example of a wide-ranging novel). According to Cecil:

People in Hardy's books are born, work hard for their living, fall in love and die: they do not do anything else.....Such a life limits in its turn the range of their emotions. (p.34)

In reply to Cecil one might say that the majority of people live just as he sees them doing in Hardy's novels. Does this then mean that they have a limited range of emotions and are not very interesting material for a novel? Surely it is Hardy's supreme achievement that he dramatises the lives of ordinary people and gives their emotions a tragic significance. The kind of people Cecil thinks are absent from Hardy's novels are 'statesmen, artists, and philosophers' but I cannot see how their presence would widen anything other than the social range of the novels; there could be no guarantee of emotional depth. Naturally Cecil finds Hardy's work at its weakest when he moves outside of his range to portray the higher ranks of society and intellectual types. He has not the command of his art that Cecil would like to see; his work is not even and steady, particularly in terms of style. Hardy's stylistic lapses illustrate, for Cecil,

.....the touching pedantry of the self-educated countryman, naïvely pleased with his hardly-acquired learning. (p.146)

And he concludes from this that:

.....it is the inevitable defect of a spontaneous genius like Hardy's that



it is impervious to education. No amount of painstaking study got him within sight of achieving that intuitive good taste, that instinctive grasp of the laws of literature, which is the native heritage of one bred from childhood in the atmosphere of a high culture. (p.146)

For Cecil there are obviously such things as 'the laws of literature' and the appreciation of literary excellence is equally obviously a matter of taste for him. Hardy's abandonment of realism and his 'violation of probability' are singled out by Cecil as examples of this lack of taste and critical discrimination.

Thus Cecil manages to confuse completely literary criticism with his own literary prejudices and cultural assumptions. His comments about Hardy's background and education show his own very limited range since, as Q.D. Leavis argues, Hardy actually had a middle-class education and his parents were certainly not the uneducated peasants that Cecil makes them out to be. This kind of literary snobbery has been a real obstacle to critical understanding of Hardy's work in England. Henry James showed it, as did Eliot and F. R. Leavis - to name only the most famous among them. In fact one might have expected Leavis to have more sympathy with Hardy as he was such a champion of Lawrence's cause. His opinion of Dickens changed as time went on, perhaps influenced by his wife, but he does not appear to have come to terms with Hardy's novels, although they are 'flawed' and 'popular' in much the same sense that Dickens's are.

Before moving on to Q.D. Leavis's defence of Hardy in Scrutiny, it is worth noting what F.R. Leavis had to say about Hardy as a

novelist in The Great Tradition<sup>27</sup> because the kind of patronising tone he uses here, as in his Southern Review article, is just what Q.D. Leavis objects to in Cecil's criticism. Leavis justifies the exclusion of Hardy from his 'great tradition' in the following way:

On Hardy (who owes enormously to George Eliot) the appropriately sympathetic note is struck by Henry James: 'The good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with Tess of the d'Urbervilles, which is chock-full of faults and falsity and yet has a singular charm'. This concedes by implication all that properly can be conceded - unless we claim more for Jude the Obscure, which, of all Hardy's works of a major philosophic - tragic ambition, comes nearer to sustaining it, and, in its clumsy way-which hasn't the rightness with which the great novelists show their profound sureness of their essential purpose - is impressive. It is all the same a little comic that Hardy should have been taken in the early nineteen-twenties - the Chekhov period - as pre-eminently the representative of the 'modern consciousness' or the modern 'sense of the human situation'. (pp.22-23)

First of all, the reference to James's verdict on Tess is a little suspect since James wrote this in a letter to R. L. Stevenson and was not offering it as literary criticism. But Leavis easily adopts not only James's patronising manner but his authoritative note which rather suggests that all discriminating readers and critics must agree with his verdict. I think John Gross has expressed the objections to Leavis's comments on Hardy rather well. Criticising The Great Tradition, he writes:

What seems to me inexcusable, though, is that Leavis should sum up Hardy by saying that James struck 'the appropriately sympathetic note.'.....

Possibly this was the appropriate note for James himself to strike, writing as a major novelist. Possibly Leavis feels that his own achievements entitle him to pat the good little Thomas Hardy on the head. But that anyone should propose that this is the appropriate way for Hardy to be talked about in general is almost beyond belief.<sup>28</sup>

R. P. Bilan too, in The Literary Criticism of F. R. Leavis, takes Leavis to task for his rejection of Hardy. Quoting the same passages from The Great Tradition, he remarks:

This tells us nothing about Leavis's reasons for disliking Hardy; perhaps the only thing it tells us is that Leavis (and James) are inept critics of Hardy. It is not satisfactory to say that we can deduce or surmise Leavis's reasons for rejecting Hardy from the criteria in the rest of his criticism - that, say, Hardy handles language poorly in places, or that he has a pessimistic vision of life; the fact remains that Leavis has not made any 'case against Hardy'.....Hardy may not belong in the great tradition, but Leavis has failed to explain his reasons for excluding him.<sup>29</sup>

While no-one would suggest that Leavis is not entitled to criticise Hardy adversely, there would seem to be no need for his assumption of superiority and his dismissive tone. Leavis's assessment of Hardy, as to some extent also of Dickens, is based upon his fixed ideas about what a novel should be. He is as guilty of intransigence as the readers and critics of the 1920's whose attitudes he finds so 'comic'. In The Great Tradition Leavis argues that Dickens is not a creative writer in the 'profound and responsible' sense; he seems to think much the same of Hardy but for different reasons. I would argue

that in his criticism of Hardy Leavis shows himself not to be a critic 'in the profound and responsible sense'. That is not to say that Leavis is in general a bad critic but that in the case of Hardy he had a blind spot which prevented him from coming to terms with his art.

Q. D. Leavis, although she has reservations about Hardy as a novelist, is more open-minded. In her essay, 'Hardy and criticism',<sup>30</sup> ostensibly a review of Cecil's book and of The Southern Review collection, she takes the opportunity to comment upon Hardy's reputation and to give her own valuation of his work. Cecil's book, she says, is merely one example of a tendency of critics to patronise Hardy and to criticise his educational and cultural background. Her defence of Hardy's cultural milieu is forceful and therefore worth quoting in full:

Hardy, we may justly reply, had a good Victorian education, was further equipped in the special arts and crafts of music and architecture, was generally well read and thoroughly understood what he read, as his notebooks show, had a remarkably acute grasp of literary theory and a most intelligent response to its practice; that if his style was often bad in the sense of being gauche, pedantic and so on, it was at least his own style and succeeded in expressing something real and personal; and that he had a heritage more valuable than that of 'one bred from childhood in the atmosphere of a high culture', (whatever that may be, for the implication that Hardy's cultural milieu was a low one is preposterous).  
(p.235)

As Mrs. Leavis points out, remarks about Hardy's education and culture are not strictly speaking literary criticism, but since they show critical attitudes informing the practice of criticism then such remarks must be questioned and answered. Such a corrective to the prevailing view of Hardy as a half-educated peasant was certainly overdue. Mrs. Leavis shows here too that she is in agreement with Zabel in thinking Hardy a far more deliberate and conscious artist than he is usually taken to be.

In the main body of her review Q. D. Leavis expresses a preference for the 'academic' criticism in Southern Review over that of Cecil in his book on Hardy. She justifies her case thus:

I am merely expressing a preference  
for criticism that comes from some kind  
of mind, instead of no kind. (p.234)

Mrs. Leavis's rather vindictive attack on Cecil's intellectual abilities stems from the differences between Oxford and Cambridge English as much as from the desire to criticise Hardy's work in a more meaningful way. The Leavises and their Scrutiny team, saw themselves as waging a war upon Belle - lettristic criticism, which tradition they saw as represented by the Oxford English school, and which for them, was an outmoded and utterly useless way to approach literature. Allied to this was F. R. Leavis's hatred of the Bloomsbury group whom he saw as self-indulgent and decadent in their lifestyle and, even more than the Oxford English school, as practising an unrigorous and leisurely criticism which had no place in the campaign for English Studies as a central moral force in

education and society. It is little wonder that Q. D. Leavis (who usually follows F. R.'s lead) is so hostile to David Cecil in her article since he had the misfortune to be a representative of both Bloomsbury and the Oxford English school. Lionel Trilling has commented on F. R. Leavis's harshness about Bloomsbury, saying that he,

.....seeks to scotch the ideas of a privileged class represented by such writers as Lord David Cecil, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell and Virginia Woolf. The Cromwellian revolution never really came to an end in English, and we can say of Dr. Leavis that he has organised the lofty intellectual expression of its late endemic form.<sup>31</sup>

To prove the point it is worth quoting Mrs. Leavis's comments in another context. This is from her Scrutiny article 'The Discipline of Letters' where she writes disparagingly of the majority of the Oxford English school:

The stultifying effect on English studies of such a régime has long been apparent. The moral is that English Studies must be cut free from the classical-scholarly tradition in every respect and at every level; must point out firmly that the ability to edit texts and make piddling comments on them is no more qualification by itself for an 'English' university post than a certificate of librarianship, since it is an ability that can be readily acquired by quite stupid people with no interest in literature.....<sup>32</sup>.

Having attacked Cecil for his critical ineptitudes, Mrs. Leavis goes on to examine the history of Hardy criticism which she sees as divided into a series of phases. The first phase is that in which Hardy's own contemporaries judged him to be 'just another

Victorian novelist.' They were not far enough removed from pastoral England to appreciate his portrayal of it, though they were sophisticated enough to realise how awkward Hardy's style was compared with other contemporary novelists, and how limited his conception of character could be. The second phase of Hardy criticism, writes Mrs. Leavis, is that of praise for Hardy's passages of natural description and of recognition of his merits as a creator of tragedy. This was also the time when comparing Hardy with Meredith became common. Since the passing of this second phase Mrs. Leavis feels that admiration for Hardy has been less abundant, partly because of the growing acceptance of the art of writers like Conrad and James; compared with them Hardy seems old-fashioned. But, like other critics of this period, Q. D. Leavis believes it is wrong to compare Hardy with writers he has nothing in common with:

It would be well if it were recognised that the novelist who can be most profitably employed for 'placing' Hardy is George Eliot, from whom he derives. (p.234)

In a general way this picture of the history of Hardy criticism is accurate but Mrs. Leavis cannot have studied the reviews and early criticism very thoroughly for she obviously has not noticed the frequency with which Hardy was compared with George Eliot and seen as her successor. For Mrs. Leavis it is their seriousness that links Hardy and George Eliot, and while George Eliot is 'the finer artist', 'the sounder thinker', 'the wiser moralist' and 'the more efficient writer', Hardy's superior appeal lies in the dramatic impact of his work. His novels leave a deep emotional impression on the reader and their greatness in this

respect outlives dispassionate critical analysis which tends to find only faults in his work.

Unlike many other critics Q. D. Leavis does not maintain that Hardy is great 'in spite of' his faults; she takes the more positive, and I think more valuable view, that what contributes to the dramatic and emotional impact of the novels is also a kind of artistry. Like so many of her fellow critics she finds Hardy criticism difficult and admits it, finally, putting it this way:

We can only be grateful for having a body of fiction that proceeds from so honest, worthy and compassionate a nature, so sensitive to human misery and so powerful to record its distresses at the spectacle of suffering, so disinterested, unworldly and unfailingly tender.  
(p.236)

Thus what we take to be flaws in Hardy's art are nevertheless part of his total vision and if we are moved by that vision then we must examine what gives it its power rather than picking fault with details of presentation based upon criteria which clearly do not apply to Hardy.

Mrs. Leavis is keen to acknowledge the importance of the essays in Southern Review, at least partly because she can spell out their difference from British literary criticism of the same period:

What really warms one's heart is the complete absence of the belletristic approach or of any aesthetic posturing, in this collective enterprise. Could one believe that any similar undertaking



on this side of the Atlantic, even before the War, would have been so profitable or even harmless? It is certainly the most helpful critical work on Hardy I know.....(p.237)

Again here we see Q. D. Leavis's attitudes being informed by her hostility to traditional English criticism. On a general level she recognises the difference of Hardy's achievement from that of most of his contemporaries but she does not examine wherein his achievement lies. Nevertheless, in spite of its lack of depth and its prejudices, Q. D. Leavis's criticism is broadly aware of the need for a revised set of criteria for judging Hardy's work. She does not dismiss it in the off-hand way that her husband does.

J. O. Bailey's 'Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants', is a rare example at this time of close focus upon one aspect of Hardy's art in order to illuminate his wider method and purpose. Bailey, another American critic, studies the significance of certain 'outsiders' in Hardy's novels - characters who appear and disappear, who disturb the tranquil current of events and who project a disquieting force into the story. There are a number of these invaders; three are dressed in red and all of them suggest strongly the supernatural by their presence. The three most obvious with their red garb are Elizabeth Endorfield in Under the Greenwood Tree, Sergeant Troy in Far From the Madding Crowd, and Diggory Venn in The Return of the Native. All are credible full-bodied creations but their actions and character gain added dimensions if we consider them also as symbols. Apart from the obvious significance of their red dress, all the characters have names and attributes which refer, directly or

indirectly to satanic qualities. Bailey goes into all this in a detailed manner which is convincingly argued but which it would be tedious to repeat here.

In addition to the three main 'visitants' Bailey also notes a number of other characters in the novels who have diabolic attributes, for example Farfrae and Newsom in The Mayor of Casterbridge and Fitzpiers in The Woodlanders. All are clever, sceptical and unreligious (in the conventional sense) and all act in one way or another as evil forces on the lives of ordinary folk, causing tragic forces to be unleashed. The sources of these 'visitants' are seen by Bailey as traditional ballads and folk tales, sensation novels and, possibly, the Vices and devils of Mediaeval drama. They are not only important in Hardy's art as melodramatic figures or as means of furthering the plot but also for their bearing on Hardy's world view:

It is likely, perhaps, that Hardy intended the casual reader to see in them a symbol representing some operation of the will in human life, and perhaps its irony in ordering the affairs of men.

This kind of close criticism of artistic devices which embody Hardy's thought in the novels, marks a significant movement away - not only from appreciation and impressionism - but also from the kind of unsupported general critical judgements passed by F. R. Leavis, Frank Chapman and even Q. D. Leavis. Bailey is scholarly in his approach but not in the pedantic sense so loathed by the Leavises; he is scholarly in the sense that he asserts nothing without reference to the novels and demonstrates the validity of his viewpoint. One does not come away from his criticism with the suspicion that his real purpose in writing it

was to prove his own critical position. He elucidates the texts, treats the art and the thought as one, and shows the supernatural springs from the human and the natural in Hardy's novels. In other words, like Zabel and Davidson in Southern Review, he treats Hardy seriously as an artist and craftsman and inquires into the construction of the artistic product without (apparently) any preconceived notion of what he must find there.

The last important study of Hardy's novels in this period is A. J. Guerard's Thomas Hardy, the Novels and Stories.<sup>34</sup> While not being really innovative or wholly original (it reshapes and assimilates many of the ideas already discussed in this chapter) it is a full and stimulating expression of the sum of the recent revaluations and reassessments of Hardy's reputations. Briefly, Guerard sees Hardy as a rebel against 'The drab and placid realms' which beset the novel so long. This derives from Zabel. He also sees Hardy as, above all, a story-teller of the ballad kind (Davidson) and maintains, like Elliott and others, that Hardy's use of chance and coincidence are deliberate devices which tie in with his philosophical viewpoint as well as heightening suspense in the novels. He goes further than this in suggesting also that the piling up of accidents and coincidences is an imaginative embodiment of what we see now as 'the absurd'.

Hardy is, for Guerard, a central figure in the 'swift and underground process' which 'led from Trollope to Kafka and Faulkner; or, even, from the fantasy of Dickens and the probings of Dostoevsky to these'.<sup>35</sup> Finally Guerard expresses the view that Hardy's 'deeply contradictory feelings about Wessex' are

crucial to understanding his art. In his novels we see him sympathising with those who want to escape it and also with those who long to return. This sense of the contradictions in Hardy's art was, as we have seen, a feature of The Southern Review criticism. It is Hardy's art rather than his thought that Guerard focuses on for he believes that Hardy was a great artist but not a great intellectual:

We must recognise that his rich and humane imagination accompanies a plodding and at times even a commonplace intellect. (p.5)

Such an acknowledgement marks a complete reversal of the late Victorian and early twentieth century insistence upon Hardy's status as a thinker. There is undoubtedly substance to Guerard's point with its implication that novelists need not primarily be thinkers and that they should not necessarily be judged as if they were.

Other points made by Guerard contain the same mixture of perception and rather brash exaggeration. His criticism has the effect of polarising the 'old' and the 'new' too much:

We are in fact attracted by much that made the post-Victorian realist uneasy: the inventiveness and improbability, the symbolic use of reappearance and coincidence, the wanderings of a macabre imagination, the suggestions of supernatural agency; the frank acknowledgement that love is basically sexual and marriage usually unhappy; the demons of plot, irony, and myth. And we are repelled or left indifferent by what charmed that earlier generation: the regionalist's ear for dialect, the botanist's eye for the minutiae of

field and tree, the architect's eye for ancient mansions, and the farmer's eye for sheepshearings; the pretentious meditation on Egdon Heath; the discernible architecture of the novels and the paraphrasable metaphysic; the Franciscan tenderness and sympathy - and I'm afraid, the finally unqualified faith in the goodness of a humanity more sinned against than sinning. (p.6)

Guerard's catalogue of what attracts a new generation to Hardy's novels is more accurate, I think, than what he supposes repels them or leaves them indifferent. While admiring Hardy's 'macabre imagination' and his suggestions of the supernatural it is also possible to admire his eye for the actual details of country life, architecture and so on. In an important sense, which Guerard does not recognise, the various parts are interdependent. His claim that Hardy's faith in an innocent humanity is no longer attractive to readers is rather startling. This faith is central to Hardy's artistic vision and cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned without argument or explanation. Again we can see the parallel with Dickens criticism in that once the critics had discovered the weird and hallucinatory side of his genius they underplayed or ignored completely his sentimental faith in the goodness of humanity, and his social criticism. Struck by their own obsession with irrational forces in the human personality and in the universal scheme, they see Kafkaesque qualities everywhere in literature. While this new method of regarding writers like Dickens and Hardy is a great revelation of their genius, it is sometimes practised only at the expense of much else that is worth commenting on.

In his discussion of characterisation in the novels, Guerard takes

the view that Hardy's women are more successful creations than his men. Where the earlier critics had often seen Hardy's women as aggressive and potentially dangerous (or even too passive) Guerard argues, in Lawrentian manner, for their vitality and their contact with life and the business of living. The men are often dreamy idealists, sexless and unaggressive; many of them have something in common with the 'neurotic voyeur'. Guerard singles out Hardy's portrayal of Sue Bridehead as his most brilliant success in delineating sexual psychology and comments upon his skill at portraying psychological abnormalities - though he feels that Hardy 'floundered badly when he tried to dramatise familiar and very real neuroses.' Again, Guerard can be seen consolidating a position in criticism which was developing throughout the thirties and forties; it is a position which takes delight in a deliberate dissociation from all that might seem remotely Victorian or Edwardian. While there are obvious insights gained from viewing Hardy's art as an expression of emotional and psychological forces, the loss of a more literal relation of his work to the surface of life means also a loss of perspective in criticism. The attitude expressed here to Sue Bridehead is an example. Victorian and post-Victorian critics saw her as a failure because they did not approve of her but also because she never seemed fully rounded and real. The more modern critic, such as Guerard, recognises her as a psychological study but does not consider whether she is a believable character in the more everyday sense of the novel as a world to be walked in.

Guerard's view of Hardy's pessimism is also typical of this period. He claimed, as we noted, that Hardy was no intellectual;

he also claims that we should not take Hardy's novels seriously as spiritual histories of an age:

He was most truly the spiritual  
historian of the age in his tempera-  
mental rather than in his formal  
pessimism. ( pp.15-16)

Guerard thinks this 'temperamental' pessimism was partly genuine but that Hardy also cultivated it as being artistically useful. He feels the same about Hardy as the historian of Dorset; Wessex is an imaginative world shaped to Hardy's vision and he has no more obligation (as an artist) to be a historian than he has to be a philosopher. So far as Guerard is concerned, critics should realise this. In order to make his point the more effective Guerard again over-simplifies the case. No critics ever took Wessex for the real Dorset, just as they never thought Hardy's characters were real people, they just talked about them as if they had reality - which is rather different. Guerard's stress upon Hardy as an anti-realist, as one 'determined to see a ghost' is a valuable contribution but he does rather denigrate his critical predecessors.

In the final analysis, as I have stated, Guerard's criticism is not wholly original although it is an important consolidation of critical attitudes expressed elsewhere in this period. He draws heavily on Zabel's and Bailey's criticism in highlighting the irrational and the grotesque in Hardy's art and the contradictions in his temperament and thought. His strength as a critic lies in his ability to connect this re-interpretation of Hardy with the wider historical and political scene:

We have rediscovered, to our sorrow, the demonic in human nature as well as in....political process; our everyday experience has been both intolerable and improbable, but even more improbable than intolerable.....Between the two wars the most vital literary movements.....arrived at the same conclusions.....that experience is more often macabre than not. (pp3-4)

G. H. Ford,<sup>36</sup> comparing the critical reputations of Hardy and Dickens calls Guerard's study 'provocative'; this suggests its qualities well because it is stimulating and brave in its judgements but also prone to exaggeration and over-simplification. Ford also notes in the course of his comparison, how far Guerard's critical approach is from that of the previous generation:

.....according to this interpretation, Hardy was first of all a story-teller rather than a commentator upon Victorian problems. To thoughtful readers of an earlier period.....the contrary was true. Although he had arrived at different conclusions concerning the intentions of the President of the Immortals, Hardy was valued as George Eliot and Meredith were valued. He was a commentator upon the profound disturbance created by Darwin and his predecessors, a disturbance with which Dickens was apparently too ignorant to be concerned. (p.190)

I think we might take issue with Ford's interpretation of the response of early Hardy critics here. He is right to say that Hardy was connected with Eliot and Meredith but is perhaps imposing a twentieth century perspective on the course of events when he maintains that the three were connected by being commentators on evolutionary theory. As we have seen through our examination of earlier criticism in Chapters One and Two, their common response to 'the profound disturbance created by Darwin and his predecessors' was not explicitly brought to the



fore and discussed. Where Ford is more correct is in his view of Guerard's criticism as offering a tradition of the English novel in which Dickens and Hardy may be brought into closer proximity. As he rightly points out:

.....the devoted reader of Hardy is much less apt to be allergic to Dickens' novels than is the devoted reader of Meredith. (p.189)

Close examination of the main critical contributions in the period 1930 to 1950 has revealed how complete a shift there was in critical attitudes to Hardy's novels. The critics themselves are particularly keen to effect a transition because they see it as freeing art and criticism from what are perceived as old-fashioned and inappropriate standards for judgement. Thus there is an almost complete reversal of the judgements of the previous generation. The high incidence of accidents, sensational events and unfortunate coincidences in the novels, in other words all the paraphernalia of melodrama, is no longer seen as evidence of poor artistry but as deliberately conceived to show a patterning of events in accordance with Hardy's vision of the world. Hardy's art is also seen as deriving from traditions other than those of realist fiction; the debt his work owes to the ballad tradition is the most obviously persuasive, but Bailey mentions his possible debt to the sensation novels of the mid-century and Barzun argues for his debt to the Gothic and Romantic traditions. Hardy's characters are now perceived differently too; their fidelity to the normal and the average is no longer a key expectation. Bailey's 'Mephistophelian Visitants' essay argues for treating some of them as symbolic. Certainly his interpreta-

tion of the role of Venn, Troy and others as diabolic, a manifestation of the powers controlling mankind, is most persuasive and stimulating. It suggests a range of other similar interpretations might be feasible. Such stress on anti-realism also leads Guerard to champion Sue Bridehead as an impressive psychological study and to praise Hardy's women for their vitality. The question of the probability and naturalness of a character now seems less important to critics than a character's credibility as a study or symbol in the novel. Closer attention to Hardy's own theories about novel-writing means that he is now perceived as a writer striving to reveal an inner reality and his novels are discussed less as philosophical treatises or as slices of life and more as quasi-symbolic structures.

Critics of the thirties and forties are not particularly interested in some of the issues which so preoccupied their predecessors. Praise or even mention of Hardy's poetic descriptions of landscape and natural beauty are scarce; the rustics and the Wessex environment are treated less as having a choral function and more as representing human society; Hardy's philosophy is, when it is discussed at all, linked more closely to its expression in his art; and his style, although inadequately explained, is seen as somehow part of his strength as a novelist rather than as detracting from it.

The most distinctive feature of criticism of this period is, however, the emphasis placed by American critics on all that is contradictory and incongruous in Hardy's art. Reacting against the naturalist and realist expectations of earlier critics who tended to see the presentation of life and ideas in novels as

a serious and essentially rational business, they celebrate the contradictions in Hardy's art as reflecting the true reality - the absurdity of life. Apart from the nature of Hardy's style, sometimes brilliant but often dull, the main contradictions are seen as being his love for Wessex and his corresponding sympathy for those who want to escape its confines, his alternately conservative and radical tendencies, and the parallel problem of his becoming more of a determinist and yet at the same time more of a meliorist. Such tensions are viewed not as weaknesses but as strengths, as in Hardy's juxtaposition of the traditionally popular and the innovatory in his novels. All in all he is still something of an enigma for critics, few of them attempt to examine the novels closely in order to test the validity of their new perceptions upon the texture of Hardy's work. Bailey is the exception to this.

In this period there is another distinctive feature which is worth commenting upon further - the gap which exists between British and American criticism. In writing of Dickens, G. H. Ford quotes two different assessments of his reputation from a British and an American critic, respectively:

"How good it is to meet someone who enjoys Dickens, and how rarely this happens."  
So begins an essay by the English novelist, Rex Warner, which appeared in 1947. In 1952, the American critic, Lionel Trilling, begins an essay with the following assertion: "No-one, I think, is any longer under any illusion about Dickens. It is now manifest that he is one of the two greatest novelists of English (Jane Austen being the other)."

He then goes on to comment:

From these contradictory statements, one might infer either that a miracle has taken place in five years, or that there exists a radical disagreement about literary preferences on opposite sides of the Atlantic.<sup>37</sup>

This juxtaposition of American and British views of Dickens has relevance for Hardy criticism in that the same pattern can be seen. One has only to think of, say, David Cecil's book (1943) as compared with The Southern Review collection (1940) which was actually written earlier but shows a completely fresh approach to Hardy. However, it does not seem to be a matter of 'literary preferences' so much as a quite different set of critical attitudes and literary expectations.

Although one cannot help objecting to the self-righteous and sanctimonious tone of the Leavises in their mission to raise the status of English as an academic discipline in order to, as it were, 'save the world', one finds oneself agreeing with their broad claim for the need for a fresh and revised approach to criticism of texts. Unfortunately for Hardy criticism, many of the prejudices (and they are often only that) shown by James, Eliot and Cecil to his education and outlook, are also revealed by Leavis in The Great Tradition.

Scrutiny's criticism of Hardy, represented by Q. D. Leavis and Chapman is more fair-minded but also shows the same condescension towards Hardy by implying that his talent was an awkward and instinctive one. British criticism between 1930 and 1950 has returned to the air of moral authority which was so evident in the Victorian reviews. Eliot and Leavis are the main proponents of this kind of criticism; Patrick Parrinder describes their methods thus:

Each sought to exercise a kind of cultural dominance, through fiat and exhortation, through the editorship of literary reviews, and through criticism impressed throughout with the stamp of a masterful personality.<sup>38</sup>

These are methods which, in the long-term and in general, may prove to have been valuable ones which we have now lost, but they are also methods which allow the kind of bias and prejudice which can be seen in criticism of Hardy in this period.

The partiality and the rigidity of critical attitudes to Hardy's novels in Britain are absent from American criticism in the same period, or at least, are not so obviously paraded. Virtually all the innovative work on Hardy is American; Zabel, Davidson, Bailey and Guerard all exemplify the new attitude that it is not the business of criticism to appreciate nor to record impressions, nor even to concern itself with historical scholarship, but to 'inquire into the peculiar constitution and structure of its product'.<sup>39</sup> This is also the emphasis given by the Leavises but for a further end - to establish 'English' as a central subject in education at all levels and thus to ensure the cultural health of the nation. However, be that as it may, the new emphasis upon 'practical criticism' - the study of the text itself - is one of the main lines of development in the fifties and after. The added moral strain in British criticism was to lead in a rather different direction, as we shall see.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### CRITICAL WORK IN THE 1950's

In the last chapter dealing with criticism from 1930 to 1950 there was evidence of a marked shift in critical emphasis, arising largely from a number of valuable critical contributions which are still highly regarded today. The 1940 Centennial issue of Southern Review marked a turning point in Hardy's reputation as both novelist and poet; Bailey's essay on Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants showed the close connection between the art and the thought of the novels; and A. J. Guerard's study (1949) finally removed Hardy criticism altogether from the era of pedantic accounts of his philosophy and too-literal interpretation of the probability of characters and events in the novels. These contributions, as we noted, were by American critics; British criticism was, on the whole, marked by a tone of patronage and moral disapproval of Hardy's ideas and his art. Q. D. Leavis's defence of Hardy's education and cultural background was much-needed but even she is still bound up in notions of what constitutes good and bad practice in novel-writing - notions which only lead to Hardy seeming a less conscious practitioner of his art than he actually was.

By about 1950 then, Hardy's fiction has begun to receive critical approval (in America at least) for reasons which had caused earlier critics and reviewers to condemn it; this process of re-valuation according to new standards of judgement continues through this decade. Hardy's novels tend to be less subject to moral disapproval (though the moral tone persists in Britain) and are

seen more as symbolic structures which reveal deep and meaningful truths about the human condition. While this latter type of analysis is often quite penetrating in that it leads to closer attention to the words on the page and to recognition of some of the peculiar qualities of Hardy's world, it does also mean that the exercise can become an end in itself and that the closeness of the novel to the unshapely and untidy areas of actual experience is forgotten. One is put in mind of Yeats's lines from The Circus Animals' Desertion:

Those masterful images because complete  
grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can.....<sup>1</sup>.

The proponents of the other major critical development in the fifties are in no danger of forgetting art's origins in reality for this is one in which literature is seen as illustrative of historical reality and which is concerned with art as man's urgent expression of the desire for change or as expressing his anger and sadness at that change. Thus Hardy's novels are seen as a record of the passing of the old rural way of life as urban and industrial values overtake it. This sociological criticism can be illuminating where it shows social and economic pressures as part of the overall picture painted by Hardy but too often it is all-encompassing and a way for the critic to display his or her preconceived ideas about nineteenth century history - the fiction being used as an example of a fixed view.

(I) The Sociological Approach

Arnold Kettle's chapter on Tess in his two-volume An Introduction to the English Novel<sup>2</sup> raises all the contentious issues associated with this critical approach. It is an irritating mixture of bald assertion of questionable facts and perceptive critical observation - the opening sentence sets the tone:

The subject of Tess of the d'Urbervilles is stated clearly by Hardy to be the fate of a 'pure woman'; in fact it is the destruction of the English peasantry. (p.45)

Thus what would normally be seen as the background to the story of Tess as an individual is pushed to the forefront and the individual is seen as typifying or symbolising the larger historical process being recorded. Another striking feature of this opening statement is its absolute disregard for authorial intention and its apparent refusal to see any connection between overt intention and what the critic reads as the real subject of the novel 'the destruction of the English peasantry'.

Kettle argues that if we read Tess as a personal tragedy it is unconvincing because it defies probability in that the heroine has more than her fair share of bad luck. In his view the novel has a pattern which approximates more closely to moral fable and he urges us to realise that:

Tess is not a novel of the kind of Emma or Middlemarch. It does not illuminate within a detailed framework particular problems of human conduct and feeling. Its sphere is the more generalised movement of human destiny. (p.50)

This seems a rather obvious claim; certainly Tess is not concerned with the nuances of moral behaviour that Emma or Middlemarch cover but there is, conversely, no reason why we should not claim that both these novels are as concerned as Tess with 'the more generalised movement of human destiny'. Kettle does not develop his point sufficiently, but instead moves on to denounce Hardy's fatalism:

.....there is no doubt that this conscious philosophy affects the book, in general for the worse. (p.52)

Although Kettle believes it was Hardy's intention to invest Tess with a conscious philosophy of fatalism he does not find it worth much because it is never integrated into the dramatic body of the novel - there is a division between Hardy's ideas and his understanding. This division weakens the novel but does not destroy it:

It survives because his imaginative understanding of the disintegration of the peasantry is more powerful than the limiting tendencies of his conscious outlook. (p.52)

So, having dismissed authorial intention and choosing to disregard Hardy's philosophical outlook, Kettle is free to interpret the novel as he will - provided he can convince the reader of his argument. The division between Hardy's ideas and his understanding stems from Lawrence's Study of Thomas Hardy (which Kettle acknowledges in a footnote) and it seems likely that his critical position and tone owe much to Lawrence also. The strident proclamations as substitutes for argument and the exhortation to trust the tale rather than the teller all testify to Lawrentian

influence. The difference in their critical stances however, is marked; Lawrence believed that Hardy's heroes and heroines should have triumphed over circumstance and broken free from the confinement of social and economic (not to mention moral) constraints whereas Kettle sees those same heroes and heroines as victims of a much larger historical and social tragedy about which they can do nothing and which is itself the true centre of the novels.

Kettle's claim that Hardy had a conscious philosophical stance is in itself debatable and conflicts with Hardy's own claim that his novels were based upon 'a series of seemings or personal impressions'. This is not so serious an assumption as that Tess is a novel primarily documenting social and historical change with fatalism as an unpleasant top dressing laid on by Hardy. One might well agree with Kettle that Hardy's ideas are sometimes imposed upon the novel from outside (Tess's conversation with her brother about the earth as a blighted star is Kettle's example) but the same ideas about fatalism are also closely woven into the texture of the novel. Tess's fate is determined not only by earthly pressures but by the suggested presence of an unseen hand symbolised through natural imagery and through patterning of plot; it is also determined, as Hardy clearly shows, through heredity and personality. If Kettle had presented his reading of Tess as one among a number of possible perspectives on the novel then it could be seen as adding something to criticism of that novel; the fact that he is so insistent that his view is the correct one and the only one, devalues the contribution it makes to Hardy criticism.

Kettle's final assessment of Hardy's rank as a novelist is that he is a lesser Shakespeare or Emily Bronte, a failed visionary artist because of his inability to transcend 'abstractions' and because of his 'inadequate ideas and judgements'. It is surprising that Tess survives this 'weakening' but somehow it does and emerges as:

.....a fine novel, a moral fable, the most moving expression in our literature - not forgetting Wordsworth - of the destruction of the peasant world. (p.56)

It cannot be doubted that both Wordsworth and Hardy have something to say about the decline of rural life and about what was most precious within that culture but it is surely a distortion of their art to maintain that this was their central concern and that all else is subordinated to that purpose. That is what Kettle seems to be maintaining in this particular chapter on Tess, just as he also presupposes that the art of Shakespeare and Emily Bronte is what Hardy should be measured against. As in British criticism of the period 1930 - 1950, we have again here a critical assessment of Hardy based upon the somewhat extraordinary fact of his succeeding 'in spite of' his manifold faults as a writer.

One of Kettle's passing observations in this chapter of An Introduction to the English Novel is the likeness of Hardy's work to that of Dickens in that both show a special relationship between character and environment whereby what we usually think of as background becomes almost a participant in the drama. The similarity between the two writers also forms the starting point of Kettle's 1966 W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture, Hardy the Novelist:



a Reconsideration.<sup>3.</sup> Although the date means that this partial retraction of his earlier views is, strictly speaking, outside the brief of this chapter, it seems more appropriate to deal with it alongside the earlier criticism. Kettle sees many technical differences between Hardy and Dickens but contends that they are broadly alike in that both have created problems for the profession of criticism because they are, on the surface at least, 'unsophisticated' writers:

I do not mean by this that they were not interested in the moral and formal aspects of their art, but that they looked at life, as artists, from below rather than above.  
(p.3)

Looking at life 'from below rather than above' is intended to refer to the education and class of the two writers and it is because they are not from the educated middle classes (where most critics come from) that criticism has found them hard to assimilate into the tradition. According to Kettle Dickens has been successfully instated but Hardy has not and there are particular reasons for this - such as that Hardy's sensibility 'was not at all that of the typical modern intellectual' and that there is a conflict in his work 'between the conservative and the radical'. Added to this, says Kettle, is the fact that many critics find it inexplicable that Hardy should have become more pessimistic as he became more successful in both literary and financial terms. All this has led to some puzzlement over the nature of Hardy's achievement which Kettle answers by reference to his thesis about the destruction of the English peasantry:

.....that a writer born and bred in rural Dorset in the middle of the nineteenth century should have felt deeply - upon his pulses - the tragic situation of the South-of England peasantry at this time does not strike me as so very extraordinary. (p.8)

But Kettle is not prepared to go so far as in his earlier work, and, in fact, modifies that view:

.....what I wrote now seems to me a bit one-sided and insufficiently close to Hardy's deepest intention and impact - but I still feel quite sure that Tess's tragedy, like Marty South's, is indissolubly bound up with a social process of which Hardy was, on every level, deeply, hauntedly aware. (p.8)

This is closer to a reasoned and objective assessment of the place of social and political matters in Hardy's fiction and, because the tone is less strident, it is more persuasive.

In this reconsideration of Hardy, Kettle touches on the relationship between nature and society in the novels; for him, nature and society are not antagonistic forces but are inextricably bound together with human nature:

.....nature is not, in Hardy's novels, contrasted with society as such. On the contrary, the natural and social are never fully separable. Man is part of nature which he touches and transforms through his work, thereby transforming himself. (p.11)

Kettle here seems to attribute to man far more control over his environment than is usually thought to be the case in Hardy's novels. It is a view more in accord with Kettle's Marxist idea of history than with the world of Hardy's novels. However,

the important point is that Kettle is seeing nature in the novels not just as landscape nor as suggestive of 'the unseen hand' but as an environment in which and with which man has to work. It is a view which becomes more common in the post-war period and which is discussed more fully by John Holloway whose essay will be considered in the next section of this chapter. It arises from a stronger sense of the individual's relationship with an uncertain society and an uncertain sense of his or her place in any larger scheme of things. Kettle places the emphasis upon the inevitable march of history as shown in the novels; other critics have different emphases.

If one sets aside the dogmatism of Kettle's criticism as a whole it is possible to see that, however unreasonably he argues at times, he is establishing a potentially valuable framework for viewing the novels. Tess, for example, is read not as an individual's tragedy, nor as a timeless ballad or poem, nor even as a moral and philosophical treatise; it is placed in a historical reality and becomes the tragedy of a society rather than of one individual. A further important aspect of Kettle's criticism is that in the light of his thesis he firmly establishes the link between Dickens and Hardy as writers not only about the people, but as he sees it, of the people. If this seems somewhat strained then it is certainly no more so than the link that was made between Hardy and Meredith. Many of the things that Kettle says about Hardy and Dickens as writers concerned with their times are also true of other writers but he is surely right to point out that their perspective is different from a writer like, say, Mrs Gaskell; it is also true that their methods are very different too and that critics have had difficulties assimilating

them into the 'tradition'. We only have to think of Leavis's criticism to acknowledge the truth of this.

In conclusion, then, Kettle's criticism is often perceptive but in many ways is unsatisfactory because he is more interested in his own thesis than in the reality of the texts themselves and what they might tell us. His criticism also shows the typically British moral strain which was so evident in the work of Eliot and the Leavises but which has here taken on the garb of commitment to a particular political ideology. This kind of criticism - from a political perspective - is, like the interest in the historical and social milieu of Hardy's novels, a sign of the direction of post-war criticism.

By way of comparison and contrast with Kettle's criticism there is also in this period a short book on Hardy's novels by Douglas Brown.<sup>4</sup> Brown's thesis is broadly similar to Kettle's but his work is more measured in tone and shows more sensitivity to Hardy's own deep concerns and how these are borne out in the novels. The contrast in tone with Kettle's criticism is clear by comparing Kettle's assertion that Tess is about the destruction of the English peasantry with this first sentence of Brown's:

There seems to me to be a clear need to establish another background to Hardy's work, agricultural rather than intellectual. (Preface p.vii)

Brown's proposition is that we cannot adequately understand the five 'major' novels (Far From the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders and Tess) without reference to the historical situation out of which they arose -

that is, the agricultural tragedy of 1870 to 1902. He begins his study of Hardy's work by an introduction to Hardy's background and particularly to intellectual influences upon his development. The importance of the friendship with Horace Moule is stressed and, interestingly, a distinction is made between Hardy's 'philosophy' which Brown describes as an 'almost religious belief' that the universe works against man and his 'practical philosophy' which was essentially meliorist. This is a more useful distinction with which to begin discussion of the novels than Kettle's vague division between Hardy's ideas and his understanding, largely because it is in accord with other tensions and contradictions inherent in the Hardy universe and because it takes into account his own statements about changes in rural life such as those contained in his essay The Dorsetshire Labourer:

It is only the old story that progress and picturesqueness do not harmonise. They are losing their individuality, but they are widening the range of their ideas, and gaining in freedom. It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators.<sup>5</sup>

Brown also draws attention to Hardy's sensitivity to criticism and his strong sense of being alienated both from his own social group and from London society. The sense of Hardy's being a socially aware and critical writer as well as being a sensitive man comes over strongly in Brown's introduction; he paints a picture of Hardy's background which is commonly agreed upon today but which was fresh and original when Brown presented it. The opening remarks on the man are, on the whole, more penetrating and impressive than the criticism of the novels.

The relation of the five major novels to Brown's thesis is that they are all set in agricultural communities and all have a common pattern in which men and women from the outside world invade and disturb the old rural values. According to Brown each novel.....

.....treats in imaginative form of the defeat of our peasantry and the collapse of our agriculture. (p.36)

Despite Brown's skilful handling of his argument the questions raised by Kettle's criticism are equally pertinent here; statements of a general nature are made about an historical period and form the basis of a literary issue. Had Brown emphasised the relative importance of the historical setting to the art of the novels then we might judge his contribution to Hardy criticism to be excellent. As it stands he tries to explain Hardy's art wholly in terms of 'the collapse of our agriculture' thus making too much out of too little and failing to convince the reader. However, while restricting himself by writing of Hardy's novels with a single theme as the basis of his argument, Brown is far more sensitive to both intellectual and aesthetic matters than Kettle was. He makes it clear, for instance, that his concern is not primarily with the causes of the rural exodus but with its human consequences as Hardy shows them. More importantly, he is able to detect in the novels the wider implications of agricultural decay - the divorce of Englishmen from a life in close contact with nature and Hardy's fear that this might be a sign of the 'progressive deterioration of the human race'. Hence Brown is far more ready to accept Hardy's own preoccupations and intentions than Kettle was; he recognises the impact of evolutionary thought on Hardy and its expression in

his art and also sees that Hardy was aware of the advantages of social change as well as its adverse effects on the rural community. Brown thus finds the 'narrative impulse' of Hardy's art to lie not only in a nostalgic looking back but also in keen imaginative vision of the future.

Having laid the foundation for his study, Brown then goes on to explore the agricultural theme in the five chosen novels. He approaches them chronologically and by doing so, sees in them 'a marked development in Hardy's art and thought', encompassing a growing sense of loss, of instability and insecurity and an increasing concern with the invasion of urban values into the rural world. This drawing a pattern of development through the novels marks a new phase in criticism of the novels since previous critics had either considered them to show no development (Chapman) or to be uneven, with Tess and Jude being grouped together as more pessimistic than the others. Brown's idea of their development is that in Far From the Madding Crowd we have the first typical Hardyean outsider (Sergeant Troy) who brings pain and sorrow into the rural community. The sophistication of the urban world and its potentially threatening qualities had been hinted at in Under the Greenwood Tree but Far from the Madding Crowd takes the matter a stage further. Brown's stress on the destructive effects of these outsiders is important to his thesis but raises problems which all criticism written within a strong conceptual framework must; namely, that there is always some evidence which destroys the framework. For instance, how does one explain the destructive and self-destructive qualities of Bathsheba Everdene since she is no outsider. Venn, too, in The Return of the Native, is seen by Brown as the embodiment of 'passive firmness', 'self-denying

fidelity' and 'patient watchfulness' - qualities which Hardy associates with the best in country life - there is no mention of his sinister and ghostly side, which readers and critics alike have found so disturbing. Clym Yeobright is central to Brown's reading of Hardy because he is the first hero to be educated 'above his station' and to move away from Wessex only to yearn for what he has lost. Brown lays emphasis on Clym's question, 'Mother, what is doing well?'; the same question is also dwelt upon by Raymond Williams when he writes on the novel in the sixties. The whole business of Clym's alienation from his own society and from that which he has been educated into fits in well with Brown's and Williams' left-wing ideology; there is no doubt that it is an important feature of The Return of the Native, as of other of Hardy's novels, and accounts for much of the dramatic tension within the tale but there are other dimensions to the novel than the social and historical which Brown and other Marxist critics tend to under-play. For instance, the primitive and timeless qualities intentionally symbolised in Egdon Heath itself are mentioned only in passing and there is no mention of the ritualistic nature of many of the human scenes enacted upon it. Few would quarrel with the view that Hardy was concerned with what 'doing well' really means; he undoubtedly shows in many of his novels the effects of education and social advancement on particular individuals but to make these questions take precedence over the many other matters also central to an understanding of the novels has a disproportioning effect.

The struggle between rural and urban values is most clearly symbolised for Brown in the relationship between Henchard and Farfrae in The Mayor of Casterbridge; he sees it as primarily a struggle between 'native countryman' and 'urban invader'. According



to Brown the novel turns on the events leading to the repeal of the Corn Laws and the consequences of this for Victorian agricultural life provide the basic impuse for the novel. This view of The Mayor of Casterbridge is given fuller treatment by Brown in a short study he wrote at a later date and which will be discussed in the next chapter where it forms part of a general critical debate on the sociological approach to the novel. Brown's reading of The Mayor in this 1953 study is only a prelude to a much wider discussion about the relationship of this and other Hardy novels to their historical context.

Brown deals with The Woodlanders at some length but his argument may be summarised as one in which he stresses the sense of life and growth in the agricultural community portrayed there but feels it is undermined by Hardy's own intrusive commentary. The tension between what is 'shown' dramatically and what is 'told' to the reader is an artistic device which heightens the sense of the fundamental insecurity of the rural community and produces a disturbing effect. The Woodlanders is thus made to fit into Brown's thesis that Hardy's five 'major' novels show the progressive deterioration of the rural community. By distinguishing between the drama itself and Hardy's own commentary Brown manages to avoid the fact that, looked at in another way, The Woodlanders is one of the least tragic of Hardy's novels and has less about the break up of rural life in it than some of the earlier novels. After all, Hardy's commentary is fairly intrusive in all his major works; to use this distinction as a means of ensuring The Woodlanders has a place in a preconceived pattern of development is somewhat suspect as criticism. A similar argument was advanced by Kettle in his criticism of this novel and there is the same implication in Brown's

work as in Kettle's that The Woodlanders represents the best of Hardy's work because it is more directly about a whole community than about one individual - this, of course, is again central to their own 'philosophy'. One also feels that Marty South is close to Brown's ideal of a tragic heroine because of her representativeness as a country girl in the overall social tragedy. Brown attributes to Marty South a stature she perhaps does not quite deserve:

.....like Cordelia, Marty South represents a redemptive possibility. (p.75)

Douglas Brown's reading of Tess also shows similarities to Kettle's though he makes his point less assertively; the novel is about Tess herself but it is also:

.....the tragedy of a proud community baffled and defeated by processes beyond its understanding or control. (p.90)

Following through his thesis that the chronology of Hardy's novels corresponds imaginatively to the actual history of the period 1870-1902, Brown sees Tess as symbolic of the actual moment of agricultural ruin. He seems to find this a less impressive novel than The Woodlanders, maintaining that it is flawed (though it survives 'in spite of' this) and that assertion tends to replace 'dramatic invention'. Brown's criticism of this last of the five 'major' novels is unexceptional for in his reading Tess must fit into position at the end of a line of dramatised statements about the decline of agricultural communities and, not unnaturally, this constrains the critical scope. It also seems odd that Jude is scarcely mentioned in this edition of

Brown's Thomas Hardy (1953) since one would have thought that its preoccupation with inequalities of opportunity and sex and class barriers would have appealed to Brown's interests. Brown claims that Jude must be seen as separate from the five major novels, not because it does not have an agricultural setting but because its methods of presentation are quite different, being nearer to the internalised and psychological mode of expression adopted by Henry James and George Eliot. The novel has a 'tarnished greatness' in Brown's view but fails to live up to its tragic potential because its 'constricted and frustrated vision' is too close to autobiography.

However, in the 1961 edition of Brown's study he has more to say about Jude and now maintains that the novel 'completes the imaginative record of the earlier novels'. He still feels that Jude is essentially different in fictional method from the other five novels originally selected and is focused on individual rather than communal experiences but is prepared to concede that:

It is a grim but necessary complement to the simpler, more affirmative novels. (p.98)

That Brown had such difficulty assimilating a non-agricultural novel into his essentially agricultural theme, when actually everything else about it is pertinent to his concerns, shows the dangers of such a narrow thematic approach to Hardy's oeuvre. Although Brown argues that the methods of Jude are different one cannot help suspecting that the initial exclusion of Jude from the line of development it so obviously forms the end of was rather a mistake.

Brown's final section in this study is devoted to discussion of Hardy's artistic method and here, as in the introductory material, Brown is on surer ground. The awkwardnesses of Hardy's style are quite convincingly accounted for by reference to his own alienation from rural and urban cultures. He writes most convincingly in those passages where he is most direct, and least convincingly where he attempts erudition to satisfy 'an educated public'. Brown doesn't really get to the heart of the problem of how Hardy's seemingly uneven style might contribute to his greatness rather than detract from it but then, no other critic has done either. At least Brown professes some understanding of the stylistic awkwardnesses and does not dismiss Hardy as an uneducated bungler with no taste, as David Cecil did.

In line with critics like Donald Davidson and Guerard, Brown stresses Hardy's artistic debt to the old ballad tradition and defines more clearly than they the elements of ballad used by him. According to Brown the influence of the ballad can be seen in Hardy's sharply defined backgrounds and in the vivid scenery used in the novels. He also feels that the close alliance between the grotesque and the natural and the symbolic representativeness of the characters owes much to the ballad tradition, as well as the song-like rhythms of the work and the neat ordering of groups of events and of characters. However, Brown's likening of Hardy's method to the older literary form of the ballad also fits rather well with his view of history which is that there existed a harmonious relationship between man and his environment in rural England which was expressed through communal or 'folk' literature and which industrial capitalism has destroyed. Hardy's novels chart this disintegration. It is interesting that both Brown

and Kettle emphasise the link between Hardy's novels and the narrative poetry of Wordsworth and that both also elevate The Woodlanders because of its illustration of the rhythms of rural life and because it focusses more on the community than on one individual. The Mayor of Casterbridge is important to them too because Henchard is a symbol of his community. The assumption seems to be that pre-industrial Britain was a kind of Garden of Eden and that Hardy's novels re-enact the tragic effects of the intrusion of urban and industrial culture upon the old rural communities. There is much value in this view of the novels if it is taken alongside a number of other perspectives and if it is remembered that Hardy's novels are not actually historically accurate but imagined worlds. Both Kettle and Brown are prone to think that theirs is the right approach and should go before all others. Kettle particularly, although he claims to view Hardy's work from a more democratic angle than the average critic, is somewhat patronising towards it in his essay on Tess, dismissing Hardy's thought and ignoring all aspects of the art which do not accord with his thesis. The value of this criticism however, with its stress on the social and historical context of Hardy's novels, is that it acts as a corrective to the critical view that holds Hardy up as a charming chronicler of country ways and sees his Wessex as a cosy world removed from the pressures of nineteenth century industrial society, not subject to change either from without or within. This was a view held by many of Hardy's Victorian and earlier twentieth century admirers who then ignored any radical or discursive elements in the fiction, just as Kettle and (at times) Brown ignore what does not suit them about it.

## (II) The Philosophy

Although Arnold Kettle and Douglas Brown both tended in their discussions to minimize the importance of Hardy's philosophy because it did not suit their critical purposes, there is in other criticism of this period more of an attempt to come to terms with the ideas after the relative disregard for them in the period 1930-1950, and the uncritical admiration of them from 1900-1930. John Holloway's chapter in The Victorian Sage (1953) is just such an attempt. The book as a whole looks at the methods and the message of a number of sages - some writers of fiction, others non-fictional prose writers. Hardy is here in the company of Carlyle, Disraeli, George Eliot, Newman and Matthew Arnold. Holloway sees them as having in common the fact that,

.....all<sup>of</sup> them sought (among other things) to express notions about the world, man's situation in it, and how he should live. Their work reflects an outlook on life, an outlook which for most or perhaps all of them was partly philosophical and partly moral. (p.1)

While the above may apply to the other writers there must be considerable doubt about whether Hardy's outlook on life is moral and about whether he 'expresses notions' about how man should live. The placing of Hardy in the tradition of the Victorian sage poses problems for Holloway which, erudite though his criticism is, he fails to overcome in the chapter he devotes to Hardy's novels.

Of all the writers dealt with in The Victorian Sage Hardy

probably has most in common with George Eliot, largely because of their both being writers of fiction with a strong provincial commitment; Holloway recognises this but also sees an important difference between the two:

Hardy does not, like George Eliot, exhort his readers to comply with what he admires and give up what he does not; about this he is fatalistic, and he rarely seems to suppose that men will or even can do much to reform their lives. (p.245)

However, having said this, Holloway still bases his criticism of Hardy upon the premise that ultimately he is prescriptive about how men should live. This does not seem to accord with the overall tone of Hardy's writing which is notably lacking in the kind of moral prescriptiveness typical of other Victorian writers. Indeed, this could be said to be one of the strengths of Hardy's work.

Before dealing particularly with Hardy's 'message' Holloway sensitively develops through example and analysis a picture of Hardy's world and his view of life. Holloway is more amenable to taking authorial intention into account than were Kettle or Brown and refers to Hardy's own dislike of labels such as 'philosopher' or 'pessimist', concluding quite reasonably:

Plainly we must strike some sort of balance between Hardy's desire not to be seen as a theorising philosopher, and his clear conception of himself as somehow giving expression to a 'philosophy' all the same. (p.247)

He also distinguishes, rightly, between Hardy's having a view of

life and the artistic expression of it. Much, says Holloway, has been written about Hardy's view but this work has tended to concentrate on what he has to say about 'the course of things' when in fact:

.....Hardy has a good deal more to say about the quality of events, the feel of them, than about their course. (p.245)

Hardy's ideas emerge through his recording of 'all the interest and variety and even charm of rustic life'; they are not a separate issue in Holloway's view, and the main part of his chapter sets out to illustrate this by 'studying the whole texture of his (Hardy's) work'.

Firstly Holloway claims that Hardy's dramatisation of his ideas is more relevant than talking of them in terms of abstractions such as 'Will', 'Chance' or 'Purpose'. Hardy's plots, for example, are evidently part of an overall attempt to show a planless universe. Thus Holloway rejects the by now outmoded critical assumption that because the plots turn on improbabilities Hardy must necessarily be an inferior artist. He expresses this point convincingly:

Literature often narrates (or dramatizes) the wildest improbabilities; and the failure seems almost never to reside in an improbability 'per se', but in some defect of presentation, some crudity or casualness in writing, which makes the improbable unconvincing but would make the probable unconvincing too. (p.249)

This seems an admirable defence, not simply of Hardy's introduction of improbabilities but of their appearance generally in literature.



One only has to think of Wuthering Heights to see the force of the argument. To the contemporary critical mind, accustomed to debate about 'fabulation' it may seem a commonplace point but it is all too easy to forget, in spite of the evidence of this thesis, how stubbornly the view persisted that fiction ought to reflect some notional objective reality and what would 'normally' be upheld as probable within that scheme. It is also true (and Holloway is one of the first to see it) that the major events in Hardy's novels do not turn upon the results of plot contrivances but tend to stem from causes deeply embedded in the character's heredity and environment. One example used to support this view is that Tess would surely not have lived happily ever after with Angel if he had received the letter that went under the mat. There are of course other instances where Hardy 'turns the screw' rather too tightly but they have received more than their fair share of adverse criticism. The most frequently cited example is the hanging of the children in Jude but Holloway claims this as a case of weak artistry which, in plot terms, serves only to effect a change of direction in Sue Bridehead's social and moral views - something ultimately stemming from her character and background rather than from this event which serves merely as a catalyst.

Holloway's discussion of nature in Hardy's novels, though intending to show how nature acts rather than to describe abstractly what it intends all the same to be somewhat theoretical. Holloway recognises and clearly articulates the role of nature as an active participant in the action of the novels, maintaining that it is 'the working and changing system of the whole world'. Its manifestations are complex and varied - a mass of bizarre details - but all adding up to 'a system of rigid and undeviating

law'. This system controls human activity and lies at the heart of Hardy's deterministic universe. The human social system and the larger universal system of nature are, in the end, all one - formed of a mass of complex and interdependent processes in which human events move to their appointed conclusion. Hence Holloway sees pattern and system in Hardy's novels but does not feel this is at odds with the rich texture of detail and closeness to ordinary lives and events shown in the fiction. In fact the two are inextricably linked:

All these details accumulate imperceptibly;  
and little by little they create in the reader's  
mind a sense of the system of Nature which no  
general description could conceivably evoke.  
(p.255)

Holloway constructs his argument in much the same way as he claims Hardy's own ideas are formed in the novels; by selecting for quotation and example many varied instances and descriptions from the texts he gradually builds up a convincing picture of Hardy's universe as an essentially deterministic one. He notes how many of the characters are described as part of nature, blending into the landscape, and also how a town such as Casterbridge is an extension of the countryside rather than being at odds with it. Part of his thesis is that natural and social are very close; not only are people and places closely linked to nature but nature itself 'has a quasi-human life'. Hardy achieves his desired effects by using figurative language, highlighting sounds, developing a sense of distances, and through visual disproportioning. These techniques impress upon the reader the variousness of nature while building up a larger sense of unity:

For him, (Hardy) the life of Nature is such that the smaller unity lies always under the impress of the larger. Nothing is cosily self-contained, nothing can be seen in isolation. (p.259)

Thus human and natural are confused and blurred 'to make them seem, in essence, one and the same'.

The attraction of Holloway's criticism lies in his ability to express a fairly clear and definite view of Hardy as a determinist without sacrificing the charm, variety and vitality of the fiction which all readers seem to experience and yet most critics like to destroy in their attempts to produce coherent arguments. If Holloway had let the matter rest here then there would be little to quibble about but, being concerned with Hardy as a 'sage' and having stated in his opening chapter that he intended to look at the message conveyed by the various writers, he now proceeds to attribute such a message to Hardy. Holloway maintains that within the system of Nature he has described, Hardy's characters are shown to have one basic choice - whether to work with the natural order of things or whether to work against it. Hardy, according to Holloway, thinks that the characters should choose to work with the system:

The single abstraction which does most to summarize Hardy's view is simple enough:  
it is right to live naturally. (p.281)

To live naturally means, in Holloway's view, 'to live in continuity with one's whole biological and geographical environment.' So, if Hardy is a Victorian sage then we should conclude that his work contains a warning against the dangers of uprooting oneself for material ends, or worse, for a romantic or abstract ideal.

Holloway even goes so far as to say that the only kind of life Hardy admires is the life of a Diggory Venn, Gabriel Oak or Giles Winterbourne, 'all solid sterling characters completely satisfied with their position in life and at one with it'..... he continues:

His whole concept of good and bad follows these lines, and is perfectly simple: people are to be admired as they have continuity with nature more or less completely, and those whom he stresses as on a false track in life are those who have lost it, and pursue some private self-generated dream instead. (p.283)

It is at this point that Holloway's criticism appears to part company with what we recognise as characteristic of Hardy's methods and his tone in the novels. Living 'naturally' is something Hardy admires, if we take it, as Holloway does, to mean a life spent close to nature, but Hardy does not suggest this is a matter of individual choice. In Hardy's novels we are shown, rather, that a life in harmony with the natural pattern of things is not always possible, either for individuals or even for modern man in general. Hardy is not moralistic about this - he accepts the changes as inevitable though he mourns the passing of a life lived in continuity with nature. Holloway does not seem to take changing social and historical circumstances into account in his criticism. He stresses the essential unity of the systems of nature and society and by suggesting that Hardy's characters can choose whether to work with or against the system and saying that Hardy would recommend the former, Holloway is arguing for complete concurrence with prevailing social laws - not something Hardy actually advocates. One only has to think of Tess's plight to realise how far apart natural law may be

from social law, the two are not always part of one vast integrated whole. Likewise, when Holloway comments that being uprooted from their biological and geographical environment is shown to be a cause of distress to Hardy's characters, we might well agree with him. It is the moral he feels Hardy draws from this which strikes a false note, i.e. that it is therefore wrong to uproot oneself for one reason or another. Hardy's characteristic tone is not one of moral prescription but of sadness, nostalgia, a sense of the inevitable march of human history and the individual's unquenchable ambition and desire, all producing a state of affairs which may not be the best but is nevertheless understandable.

Hardy's broadmindedness, his sympathy and fairness, are qualities shared by George Eliot; they also have in common, broadly speaking, a deterministic view of the world. The difference between the two writers is that having presented the reader with her world view, George Eliot goes on to suggest how man ought therefore to act for the best for self and others while Hardy makes no such suggestions; his faith in man's ability to improve his lot is limited and the fact that he is not a didactic writer (in the Victorian sense) is what sets him apart from his predecessors. A final quotation from Holloway's essay illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of his critical approach:

.....Hardy has an unusually detailed, developed, idiosyncratic picture of what the world is like, how the human species is placed in it, and how by consequence that species ought to live. (p.287)

The final clause 'and how.....to live' shows again that Holloway sees Hardy's work as embodying a moral imperative which seems at odds with the tone of his work as the reader experiences it.

Hardy is less concerned with how man ought to live than with how he does live in a complex and imperfect world; his skills lie in description rather than prescription.

A later essay of Holloway's<sup>7</sup> shows him taking into account the importance of social and historical changes in Hardy's novels in a way in which he fails to do in the Victorian Sage essay. He opens by noting that current criticism stresses the connection between Hardy's pessimism and his concern with the decline in agriculture and rural traditions in South West England in the nineteenth century. Holloway agrees that Hardy's 'deepening and harshening gloom' is not only a result of personal dissatisfactions or philosophical bias but is also related to 'his vision of the passing of the old rhythmic order of rural England'. However, he goes further than either Kettle or Brown in saying that the novels, read in this way,

.....suggest something more disquieting:  
a gathering realization that that earlier  
way did not possess the inner resources  
upon which to make a real fight for its  
existence. The old order was not just a  
less powerful mode of life than the new,  
but ultimately helpless before it through  
inner defect. (p.235)

According to Holloway, taken chronologically, the major novels show the progressive and steady weakening of Hardy's faith in the ability of the old order to withstand change until finally, in Jude, this faith has disappeared altogether. This may, he speculates, be why Hardy gave up novel-writing.

Holloway considers this progressive weakening of Hardy's faith

in the regenerative powers of the rural community in relation to five of the major novels (The Return of the Native, The Mayor, The Woodlanders, Tess, and Jude). According to him, The Return of the Native 'resolves in an assertion of the old order', and in The Mayor, although Henchard is defeated he is still able to struggle on, 'not because of what he has learned but because of what he is'. However, in Tess and The Woodlanders, dreaminess and passivity are seen as inherent qualities in the country folk - 'The stock is in decline' and can be seen as self-destroying. Also in Tess, we see for the first time the ugliness and cruelty of rural life which becomes even more prevalent in Jude where the main representative of the rural community is Arabella,

.....whose work is to wash the innards of the newly slaughtered pig, and whose attractions take their force from brutal humor, coarse sensuality, and a rooted tradition of deceit. (pp. 238-239)

As Holloway himself admits, his thesis is not 'the whole truth' about Hardy's novels, it is necessarily over-simplified to make a particular point. What is important about it, for Hardy criticism as a whole, is that it draws attention - albeit rather tentatively - to the way in which Hardy adopted an evolutionary framework for his novelistic output. A few critics (Brown, Zabel, David Cecil come to mind) had noted Hardy's debt to scientific ideas but this is not quite the same as what Holloway is suggesting, which is that Hardy's 'narrative trajectory', as he calls it, was informed by evolutionary patterns. Thus he does not only adopt evolution as a theme or as part of his philosophical stance, but embodies it in the narrative, largely through plot. It is clear from his concluding remarks, that Holloway means

evolution in the biological sense and not just the historical and social sense. He writes of the drabness and harshness of the picture of rural life in Hardy's later novels as being 'not a product of change and modernity, but intrinsic' and adds finally:

This being so, he had no position to which to retreat. He does not seem ever to have viewed human nature as ineradicably vital, as possessing an innate power to transform, from its own resources, its waste land into a fertile one. To say this is not necessarily to make a point against him. He may very well have been right in thinking that the human species, like others, wilts out of its natural habitat and communal order. (p.245)

Holloway's reading of Hardy's novels as informed by evolutionary ideas and as structured according to an evolutionary pattern, as it were, is not only a valuable contribution in its own right but prefigures the much closer examination of the relationship between evolutionary (particularly Darwinian) theory and narrative structure in his fiction which has taken place in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

Both of Holloway's critical essays argue persuasively the view that Hardy's universe is a deterministic one where individual choice and responsibility for one's actions have little place. An essay by J. O. Bailey, 'Hardy's Vision of the Self (1959),<sup>9</sup> attempts to modify this kind of view of Hardy's novels. This essay is perhaps less impressive than Bailey's earlier contribution, 'Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants', but it is, nevertheless, an original and stimulating piece of criticism. The study deals with apparitions which occur towards the close of several



of Hardy's novels and which reveal to the percipients an aspect of their inner natures. The characters involved, having thus seen themselves in a new light, are able to accept a measure of responsibility for their past mistakes and cease then to feel that they are wholly victims of Chance or Fate. Such 'ghosts' appear as frequently in the early novels as the later ones but the later works show Hardy's increased control over his art in that the significance of the apparitions is handled more subtly and skilfully. Examples are given from almost all the novels; several of these would be unlikely to have struck the reader consciously at the time of reading but it is possible to see when they are pointed out how they may have helped towards the forming of that overall impression of magic and strangeness we are often left with at the end of a Hardy novel. As Bailey points out, drawing an increasingly common parallel between Dickens and Hardy, Hardy's ghosts are 'sterner and less obvious' than those of Dickens, but they have an equally important role to fulfil in his fictional universe.

It would be tedious to repeat all the examples cited by Bailey of the appearance and significance of these phantoms in Hardy's novels but one or two illustrations may make his argument clearer. In The Mayor of Casterbridge Henchard sees his effigy floating down the river but as it is a false image he learns nothing from it. Later when he sees Newson and is described as standing 'like a dark ruin, obscured by the shade from his own soul up-thrown', he has been invited to look into his own heart and see the truth of his life but on this occasion refuses to do so. Only after Henchard has been upbraided by Elizabeth-Jane for concealing the identity of her real father does he truly see his own soul and

the shade obscuring it falls away. Having finally perceived the truth, Henchard can give up struggling and go to his own death peacefully. The stranger in Brazil who speaks to Angel Clare and is instrumental in his feeling remorse for his treatment of Tess is a kind of vision or ghost and, more subtly, Sue Bridehead's own vision of herself after the sight of her dead children leads her to remarry Phillotson - this is clearly a false vision. She sees herself truly when Jude is dying and she realises it is her fault and that she does love him; for this she does penance by sacrificing herself to Phillotson. Finally, as Bailey notes, the whole of The Well-Beloved is concerned with the seeing of ghosts and the consequences of this.

Bailey's argument is developed further than mere description of when and where significant visions occur to characters in Hardy's novels; as he points out, the ghosts are not there for atmosphere only but are artistically conceived devices conveying Hardy's sense of the universe, his 'philosophy'. Bailey successfully shows the reader how inextricably artistic detail and thought are connected in Hardy's work; the two are seen (as Hardy would have wished) as part of an overall impression of what life is like. Hardy enables the reader to identify with the individual character's perspective but also to see that individual's fate as part of a larger scheme of things and this is in no small part owing to the creation of a sense of the supernatural which Bailey so vividly illustrates in this essay as in her earlier one.

### (III) Critical perception of Hardy's Art in the 1950's

Separating critical comment on Hardy's art from comment upon

his thought is more difficult than in the earlier periods because critics tend far more to treat the art and the thought as inextricably bound up with one another. Even a critic like Holloway whose explicit intention is to consider Hardy as sage pays a great deal of attention to the artistic expression of his views; he certainly does not assume, as some earlier critics did, that Hardy had a consistent philosophical stance and that the novels were written to illustrate it. Bailey's contribution too, although included in the section on philosophy, is as concerned with artistic devices like plot and symbolism as with propounding Hardy's ideas abstractly. In the same way the criticism contained in this section is often concerned with Hardy's thought though it takes as its main topic the art of the novels.

Dorothy Van Ghent, for instance, in her essay on Tess of the d'Urbervilles,<sup>10</sup> immediately makes discussion of the one dependent upon the other by saying that whatever impact a work of art has as a statement of the human condition depends ultimately upon 'the internal relations of the art form, the aesthetic structure'. Such a view, one observes, is at odds with the Marxist line taken by Brown and Kettle with its insistence upon the novels' closeness to 'lived' history as a standard for judgement. In fact, during this period criticism illustrates the widening of that gap which we saw starting in the thirties and forties, between British critics and their treatment of fiction as document or sermon and American critics who, adhering to New Critical practice, view the novel as an isolated aesthetic object with its own laws. Van Ghent's essay is a remarkably persuasive example of the latter type of criticism; she begins by stating that Hardy's novels have put 'the internal relations of the art form' very much to the test:

.....for there is perhaps no other novelist,  
of a stature equal to Hardy's, who so stubbornly  
and flagrantly foisted upon the novel elements  
resistant to aesthetic cohesion. (p.196)

The elements in question include Hardy's use of coincidence and accident as the framework of his plots; Van Ghent justifies such seemingly clumsy artistry on the grounds of its being a means of patterning experience, of making art out of the disorder of reality. She also says that it is more appropriate to call this method of Hardy's 'accidentalism', as a way of distinguishing it from the more casual and random sense of the word 'accident'.

However, Van Ghent's chief 'element resistant to aesthetic cohesion' is what she terms Hardy's 'bits of philosophic adhesive tape'. According to her, (and she here expresses what has become a commonplace) Hardy's true philosophic vision is embodied in his art so that form and content are fused and the experience presented to the reader is the same as its meaning. This vision sometimes fails and she says of the philosophy:

When it can be loosened away from the novel to compete in the general field of abstract truth - as frequently in Hardy - it has the weakness of any abstraction that statistics and history and science may be allowed to criticize.....  
(p.197).

Hardy's ideas are seen as being successful only when they are 'internal and essential' rather than 'external and devitalised'. In general the view of Hardy's thought expressed here is little different from that first expressed by D. H. Lawrence and much later echoed by Kettle; the difference lies in the more detailed argument pursued by Van Ghent and her concentration of the issue

upon a single text. This kind of close focusing (again following the New Criticism) is typical of American criticism in this period and we are shown here, as in other critical articles such as Baileys', the workings of patterns of imagery around a central theme. Where Dorothy Van Ghent's criticism distinguishes itself from much of the rest is in relating the metaphorical aspect of the novel to its realism.

The central metaphor of Tess is seen as being 'the earth' but it is also the most real and solid thing in the book:

In Tess the earth is primarily not a metaphor but a real thing that one has to move on in order to get anywhere or do anything. (p.202)

It is, argues Van Ghent, because the earth is so very physical and real that it is also a successful symbol for the 'Final Cause' or mystery of life - it penetrates every aspect of the novel in its immensity and is inscrutable. Having argued for the centrality of 'earth' to the structure and themes of Tess, Van Ghent expands her point by suggesting that the role of the rustics is as a bridge between 'earth' and the individualised moral consciousness of major characters such as Alec and Angel. The rustics have a 'colonial' existence, they believe in coincidences and magic, and their fatalism links them with the 'accidentalism' of the plot and with earth as 'Final Cause' - just as their existence close to the soil binds them to the earth in the physical sense. Tess herself is seen as a figure tragically torn between the egoism of Angel and Alec and the primitive and sensual world of the 'folk'. Her final appearance at Stonehenge is fitting in Van Ghent's view because it suits her closeness to earth; she rejoins the world of

the rustics through her stabbing of Alec. Angel and Alec are described in symbolic terms too:

Both Angel and Alec are metaphors of extremes of human behaviour, when the human has been cut off from community and has been individualised by intellectual education or by material wealth and traditional independence. (p.209)

While one would not quarrel with the broad truth of Van Ghent's reading of Tess it sometimes seems over-schematised and stresses the symbolic and poetic aspects of the novel at the expense of what might be called the flux of the narrative, the ragged edges of the fiction. The reader of a novel does not initially view it as a self-contained whole and often finds it necessary to adjust his/her impressions of characters and events as the tale proceeds. The kind of criticism that treats novels like poems as 'artefacts to be investigated' and forgets that they are also 'worlds to be walked in' can easily do a disservice to the novel's uniqueness as a genre by insisting upon a symmetry and a significance which it does not necessarily possess. Although the Victorian critics often viewed novels as virtual mirrors of reality and expected perhaps too much fidelity to realistic detail, we see in this period a movement to the opposite extreme where critics are so intent upon searching for a deeper structure of reality in the work that they forget the novel's close approximation to the everyday surface reality of time, and place, and its individualisation of character. Dorothy Van Ghent's criticism is not the most extreme example of the tendency to over-schematisation in this period, and it is in many respects an original contribution to Hardy criticism, but she is certainly prone to see everything in Tess as metaphorical and to

reduce characters and events to pieces in a larger puzzle.

There are several critical contributions during this period which may justifiably be termed 'over-schematised', quite a number of which concern the issue of tragedy in The Mayor of Casterbridge. Although this novel was largely ignored by Hardy's contemporaries and attracted little comment up to 1950, it features quite prominently in the commentaries of the fifties, largely it would seem, because it lends itself to symbolic and representative interpretation. The best known critical article on The Mayor from this period is John Paterson's 'The Mayor of Casterbridge as Tragedy'<sup>11</sup>. which reads the novel as a classical tragedy on the Aristotelian model that has somehow sprung up in a foreign period and a foreign genre. Paterson begins:

As a man of his time and place, Thomas Hardy was ill-equipped to meet the challenge of tragedy in its traditional form. (p. 91)

but goes on to say that Hardy inherited a 'traditional moral wisdom' which emerges only in this one novel where Hardy is 'temporarily freed from the humanistic impulses of his time'.

Paterson bases his estimate of The Mayor as a classical tragedy on the following premises: firstly he claims that the novel is traditionally based and contains a sense of the grand and heroic in human experience; secondly the events of the book show, as in classical tragedy, a moral intelligence beyond man's power to control; and, thirdly, Paterson sees Henchard's fall as obeying a distinct law, which unlike other novels, shows itself to be supernatural rather than natural. The contest between man and the

gods is more equal in this novel than in others of Hardy's because Henchard's pride and passion are a match for the gods and we see in the novel the postulation of an ideal justice and wisdom such as Hegel found in the tragedies of Shakespeare and Sophocles. This, very baldly, is the gist of Paterson's argument - an argument which provoked a reply from H.C. Webster<sup>12</sup>, raising most of the objections which immediately spring to mind. The first and most significant objection to Paterson's argument raised by Webster is that he assumes the classical view of tragedy to be most tenable one and one which is superior to more recent and by implication, diluted theories of tragedy. Also, as Webster asks:

.....must we agree with Hegel, whom Mr. Paterson quotes approvingly, that 'ideal justice and wisdom' preside 'over the tragic drama of Sophocles and Shakespeare'.(p.91)

Webster disagrees, for example, that it is an ideal justice which causes Oedipus to kill his father and marry his mother. I do not wish to enter into discussion of the moral and philosophical problems surrounding Oedipus Rex, interesting as they are, as it would be moving too far from the central issues of this study but what is relevant is Webster's challenging of the assumptions upon which Paterson's argument rests. In fact Webster feels that Paterson adheres, whether consciously or not, to New Critical practice and that this practice is too fixed and measured in its assessments. Even following this method Webster thinks that Paterson's criticism might include Anna Karenina or Middlemarch and that it is wrong to view The Mayor as unique to its genre.

Webster's point is, I think, that Paterson's closeness to the New



Criticism narrows his response to literature because, for instance, no account is taken of Hardy's own definition of tragedy as 'the worthy encompassed by the inevitable' and also no reference is made to the social and historical context in which the tragedy is set which might lead to an adjusted view of what a tragedy is. As Webster notes, if we consider the historical circumstances, then it is extremely unlikely that a single classically tragic novel should emerge to justify the ways of God to man. In his view The Mayor of Casterbridge, far from exhibiting the operation of an ideal justice, seeks to explain God's apparent injustice so that many can accept, without docility, the look at the worst which may be followed by the discovery of the better. Thus Paterson and Webster are reading quite different things into the same novel or, rather, coming to quite different conclusions about its philosophical and moral bias by using different critical methods. Although Paterson's criticism is (in spite of its narrow focus) very persuasive because it argues effectively against overstressing social history in the novel, Webster is equally persuasive in his plea for a more expansive and accommodating definition of tragedy. He argues for a view of tragedy which takes account of changed historical circumstances and of the author's own intentions and attitudes and does not confine criticism to the study of literary and linguistic structures. It would certainly seem from Paterson's criticism that such narrow and close focussing, ably as it is practised, can lead to some very eccentric readings of literary texts if it fails to refer to relevant facts surrounding the text which may have made it what it is.

A further example of a rather rigid approach to tragedy in The Mayor of Casterbridge is D. A. Dike's essay 'A Modern Oedipus - The Mayor of Casterbridge'<sup>13</sup>. which draws parallels between Hardy's

novels and Sophocles's tragedy but transposes the tragic action to a sociological context. In Dike's reading the tragedy is about 'the genteel warfare of economic competition' with the market place at Casterbridge as the centre of the drama. The 'market' subordinates instinctive feeling to the cash nexus; money, fame, and popularity are the values of Casterbridge and these values are embodied in Henchard. The basis of the tragedy is thus established as being social and economic, Henchard falls and Farfrae rises but, according to Dike, the values of the community remain the same. What distinguishes the tragic pattern in The Mayor is 'the precise moment in the evolution of capitalism which he (Hardy) has selected for his scene'. This 'moment' marks the passing of an era and signifies the arrival of the entrepreneur and the demise of the stockholder. Henchard as stockholder loses wealth, power and popularity but in the tragic pattern gains in perception and self-awareness as he falls. Dike's yoking of modern social and economic theory with classical tragedy is not unsuccessful but is over-simplified and incomplete. Its success lies in its suggestiveness, and in the odd perceptive comment which illuminates a particular incident in the novel; as a coherent independent reading of The Mayor Dike's criticism is much too schematised and like so many other contributions from this period reduces the novel as novel by comparing it with the action of a drama in a bid to convince us of the profundity of the work. The sense of the novel's inferiority as a genre still lingers on.

These fifties studies of The Mayor of Casterbridge concentrate almost exclusively on the conflict between Henchard and Farfrae and on Henchard's character, usually in relation to some wider

scheme in which the two protagonists are symbols of the past and the future; it is very noticeable that few of the other characters and events are mentioned. Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane who are more than mere off-shoots of the main action, who often determine the course of events, are dismissed in a sentence or two; the rustics and all the community of Casterbridge and its environs are seen only as a backdrop to the central conflict between the two men or as representative of the classes and economy of the society in which the tragedy is set. Donald Davidson's essay on The Mayor<sup>14</sup>. is as guilty of this as those critics already discussed. He, in yet another schematic interpretation which draws upon his earlier thesis about Hardy's debt to the ballad, sees the struggle in the novel as one between the forces of tradition and anti-tradition and applauds Henchard as the traditional bold Englishman of ballad - a positive, masculine man, unafraid of commitment and by that token a rarity in English fiction. Davidson expresses it thus:

The tragedy of Henchard is the tragedy of a truly masculine man in collision with forces that turn the traditional masculine virtues into liabilities. (p.79)

The new régime has no time for the masculine virtues of bodily strength, valor, piety, fidelity and chivalry which Henchard embodies and Davidson makes it clear by his choice of phrasing that he is not in favour of this new régime and himself endorses those 'traditional masculine virtues'.

Davidson's interpretation is extremely biased and subjective by any standards but merits a mention if only because a similar reading of the same novel much more recently arrives at a quite different

conclusion. Elaine Showalter's 'The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge'<sup>15</sup>. also sees Henchard as losing his masculine qualities but she argues that his acquisition of traditionally female qualities is what makes him more sympathetic and human by the end of the novel. This most interesting reading of The Mayor will be examined more closely in a later chapter.

Judging by the relatively high number of articles on The Mayor of Casterbridge in this period and the corresponding taste of the period's critics for what Leavis describes as 'the novel as dramatic poem'<sup>16</sup>. one must conclude that The Mayor lends itself to this kind of interpretation. Of all Hardy's novels it is the closest in form to a drama in that it has a clearer unity of time, place and action and also because it approximates to tragedy in some sense of the word. The Return of the Native is also cosmic in scope and vaguely tragic but lacks the focus on one main character the The Mayor has and does not have its clearly outlined plot nor what Chapman termed its 'sureness of environment'.<sup>17</sup> Reading the novel as 'dramatic poem' has, in this instance, the advantage that it assures the book's status by showing it has form - that much sought-after quality in fiction. Unfortunately the stress on form and on internal symmetry often detracts from other less orderly, but equally compelling and important aspects of the novel, such as more minor characters or the use of folklore and superstition to reinforce the main themes or even the real nature of the tragedy - most critics are so busy turning The Mayor into something else that they fail to investigate what it is really about.

The search for symbols and significance is not confined to

criticism of The Mayor of Casterbridge, Norman Holland's essay, 'Jude the Obscure. Hardy's Symbolic Indictment of Christianity'<sup>18</sup>. finds patterns everywhere in that novel. Hardy himself admitted that Jude was full of contrasts, and the pairing of the characters with its shifts throughout the book are not hard to see, but Holland goes further and sees in the patterning and the Christian and pagan imagery an allegory of the state of Christianity in Victorian society. This accords with his view of Hardy's development for Jude is seen as a transitional work between fiction and poetry:

.....from writing in which he [Hardy] treated people and events realistically to writing in which he treated them as nonrealistic symbols for ideas. (p.50)

Holland, though making what seems a reasonable suggestion, again over-simplifies a complex novel and overstates his case in order to create a more dramatic effect.

However, in order not to be accused of carping it is worth examining one extremely intelligent and penetrating critical article on the art of Hardy's novels; this is Emma Clifford's 'The Child: The Circus: and Jude the Obscure'.<sup>19</sup> She maintains that as Hardy is primarily a creative artist we should not expect him to be a theorising philosopher and that, moreover, he never intended his work to be seen in this way, referring to his novels always as 'impressions' and insisting that they were not 'arguments'. Clifford sees Hardy as being subject to strong intellectual influences which colour the novels but above all she sees him as an artist who saw reality in a highly individualised

and imaginative manner. In her view, when Hardy begged critics to concentrate on his impressions rather than his arguments he was urging them to realise this very private vision of his.

As an example of how criticism has misunderstood Hardy's work through treating it too theoretically and abstractly, Clifford discusses the children in Hardy's novels. She agrees that Hardy's children are not the models of youth and prettiness we associate with fictional children but this does not mean that Hardy could not portray the world of the child. Clifford argues that Hardy's children are often very child-like and that their strangeness arises largely from the burdens imposed upon them by adults. Not fully understanding the adult world, children like Little Father Time and Johnny Nonsuch become afraid and retreat into a world of fantasy and this in turn is like the world of the artist - and particularly of Hardy, who described himself as like a bewildered child at a conjuring show. Clifford's criticism is very similar to that of Zabel and Guerard in the 1940's in that it stresses the incoherence and madness of the world that lies beneath the surface of Hardy's novels; there is also a similarity to Dickens, whose vision is often thought of as being child-like.

In developing her argument, Clifford notes the frequency with which circuses, travelling fairs and shows are used in Hardy's novels to evoke a weird atmosphere. There are also many occasions when characters step into sudden light out of darkness, startling the reader. Such incidents are not directly symbolic but contribute greatly to atmosphere; if they have any wider significance it is as representative of a world of clowning, contorting and hectic brightness which is the nearest Hardy gets

to suggesting a kind of Hell. That he should see hell in this rather vivid way may be a result of his uncertainties about religion. In Jude this use of visual imagery reaches a climax because the overall background is greyer than in the earlier novels so that the images have an even more startling effect. Childhood and age are shown as states of mind bearing little relation to actual age in the novel; Jude himself has as a child many aged qualities and as a man is often naïve and afraid. The relationship between Jude and Sue, too, is like that between two children - Arabella sees them in this way when she spots them at the fair together, holding hands. Jude is always vulnerable and insecure, particularly when he is in Christminster which represents a kind of Hell for him, a place full of ghosts and dark alleys where strange tales are told to him by quacks, hunchbacks and travellers. Throughout the novel Hardy shows a fascination for the life of the nomad - so much so that it seems to represent an escape from real problems and becomes an element of stability in a changing world. The world for Jude and Sue is a frightening place; they live says Clifford:

.....in an anonymous world of Kafka-like nightmare as they wander from one community to another, often peopled with unnamed and sometimes unknown persons. (p.545)

This child-like world is subject to disruption not only by nomads but by figures of authority such as policemen and clergymen who are symbols of the adult world. Little Father Time, on the other hand, is very aged although he is a child in years. He sees life as 'an idiotic farce' and has little idea of reality in the fixed sense. Clifford argues that if we see Little Father Time in this

way then his actions do not seem so improbable nor so inexplicable and he himself does not seem such an incredible character. Those who have objected to him as unrealistic or plainly unacceptable (and many critics have so objected) have worked from assumptions about fiction which fail to illuminate the whole complex fabric of Jude the Obscure.

Emma Clifford's essay on Jude is important because it suggests that the novel has a profundity which had hitherto been all but ignored by critics. Her criticism, like that of J. O. Bailey in 'Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants', is based upon a view of Hardy as a poetic writer using motifs and symbols recurrently to achieve his 'impressions' of life. Importantly too, she focusses her attention upon one novel and upon one area which has been largely misunderstood by critics because their standards of judgement were misconceived. Clifford's criticism brings out - as did Bailey's - the relationship between visual imagery and natural description on the one hand and Hardy's deeply felt convictions about the universe which are usually termed his philosophy on the other. Both these critics show how art and thought are inextricably bound up together in one total vision. Thus fairytale characters and improbable happenings do not, as also in Dickens' novels, necessarily mean escapism or unreality they can be suggestive of a view of the world and of our innermost hopes and fears.

The period between 1950 and 1960 is one in which it is possible to see a consolidation of critical approaches originating in the 1940's. Thus Hardy is seen as a popular writer drawing on the ballad form and is increasingly likened to writers such as Dickens, Wordsworth or Lawrence rather than to his intellectual



and artistic contemporaries. However, the conception of him as a specifically rural writer concerned with change and destruction in country life, is new in this period. While Kettle and, to some extent Brown, rather overstate the case for Hardy as a socially aware and politically motivated writer there is clearly much to be said for viewing his work within an agricultural tradition rather than an intellectual one, as Brown suggests. Consideration of Hardy's novels for what they reveal of the changes in social life in the nineteenth century continue to this day in various forms. A further related point is that in the 1950's it became common (we see it in Kettle's, Holloway's, and Brown's criticism particularly) to trace a pattern of development through the novels, to see them as moral fables, progressively more gloomy about the prospects for any change being for the better. Such a pattern had not been traced before this decade which would seem to suggest that the sociological approach offers a fairly coherent perspective on Hardy's novels provided it does not seek to explain everything in them in the light of rigid dogma.

Not only does the notion of Hardy as a popular writer prevail in the fifties, the conception of him as anti-realist also gathers force. As we saw, critics such as Bailey, Zabel and Guerard put forward this view in the forties; in this period we see it becoming entrenched. Bailey's work is again written from this perspective, as is the work of Emma Clifford; they both concentrate on relating Hardy's use of light and dark, magic, ghosts and other seemingly sensational devices to his overall vision or 'philosophy' of life. While integrated and intelligent studies such as theirs are most illuminative the same cannot be said for

some of the criticism which treats the novels as quasi-symbolic structures or tries to convince us that they are really poems or dramas rather than novels. Even Dorothy Van Ghent who is highly regarded for her work on the novel tends to have too complete and tidy a thesis about Tess. She and Kettle, as authors of books on the art of the novel, both eschew appreciation and stress the need for analysis in novel criticism but both, in their different ways, are rather bound by the terms upon which they approach that analysis. Van Ghent, for instance, maintains that her business as an analytic critic is 'to ascertain and place in focus the pattern of each novel as an aesthetic whole'; and Kettle similarly stresses wholeness:

We have to see each novel whole before we can attempt to assess the parts or even to decide the criteria relevant to our judgements.<sup>20</sup>

Both critics emphasise the special relationship of the novel with history, Kettle focussing on literature's relevance to life and the need to see both in historical terms and Van Ghent on the way that literature individualises while history (as a discipline) generalises and abstracts. Yet, both Kettle and Van Ghent insist upon the fluidity of the novel; it has a pattern and is a whole but in a complex and ever-changing way. It does seem that there is something of a contradiction here in that if a novel constantly shifts and flows (in a way that poems and plays do not) then it is difficult to see it as a whole and to analyse and interpret it in any really conclusive way. Neither Kettle nor Van Ghent takes into account the possibility that different readers might bring to and take from the novel quite different perceptions as to the meaning and the pattern of a novel. They assume that there is a

meaning and a unity to the work which can be reached by the use of the correct analytical methods; for instance Van Ghent says:

A novel itself is one complex pattern or Gestalt, made up of component ones.....the nearest similtude for a novel is a "world". This is a useful similtude because it reflects the rich multiplicity of the novel's elements and, at the same time, the unity of the novel as a self-defining body..... The sound novel, like a sound world, has to hang together as one thing. It has to have integral structure. Part of our evaluative judgement is based on its ability to hang together for us.<sup>21</sup>.

While there is much to be said for Van Ghent's treatment of novels as worlds, as in her criticism of Tess, her search for pattern and structure leads to interpretation of novels as if they were poems or even as if they were static in the way a sculpture is. This kind of criticism, as much as Kettle's, puts one in mind of Lawrence's words on the subject:

The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, and circumstance, and untrue outside of its own time, place and circumstance. If you try to nail anything down in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.<sup>22</sup>.

Lawrence's words could apply equally well to both novel-writing and novel reading and criticism; they are important because in the fifties we see only the beginnings of attempts in criticism to 'nail the novel down' - in the sixties they proliferate. Efforts to make literary criticism more rigorous and disciplined in its approach mean that all too often the object of attention is judged according to standards and criteria brought to it from outside,

whether it be preconceptions of a philosophical or political nature or some theory of literary structure. Hence the theory is the important area of interest and the text merely somewhere to practise the application of it. This can lead to interpretations of the text which take little account of its overall impact and concentrate only on the area relevant to the critic's theoretical stance whether it be Marxist, psychologically orientated, New Critical or whatever.

In the 1940's differences in emphasis and approach between British and American critics were apparent and, as I suggested at the beginning of the present chapter, continue to be so in this period. There is much more concern in British criticism of Hardy's novels with his message and whether he has something important to say about life. This is evident in Holloway's treatment of Hardy as a Victorian sage and Kettle's essay on Tess is almost wholly concerned with Hardy's radical qualities; this fits in with his view of the relationship between content and form as expressed in the introduction to his book:

To give your story the pattern of a figure of eight is only worth while in so far as that pattern has a significance relevant to what you are saying.<sup>23</sup>

While I am sure few critics would disagree with this, Kettle constantly emphasises the subordination of form to content in his criticism, while in general the reverse could be said to be true of American critics. John Paterson's essay on The Mayor of Casterbridge as Tragedy and Van Ghent's essay on Tess (as well as a number of minor contributions) are both more concerned with

making points about form and structure than with what Hardy is actually trying to say in the novels. Almost all the critics under discussion pay lip service to the interdependence of the two but only the very best illuminate for us the way in which the ideas or message are impressed upon us through the form the artistic expression takes. In this period only Bailey and, possibly, Emma Clifford and John Holloway achieve something of this sort because they take up the forties critics' 'discovery' that improbability and unreality are not the same thing and develop their criticism around the art and Hardy's ideas in this respect. Important also is that Clifford and Holloway, regardless of whether one accepts every facet of their arguments, manage to convince us of the effectiveness of the Hardy world because they never lose sight of the movement and texture of the novels and are able to show how small impressions accumulate into larger ones as we read on. Such attention to detail, to explaining the 'feel' of the novels rather than to picking out symbols and patterns, is where Hardy criticism has been most successful because it runs close to Hardy's own concerns and methods. As I hope to show through examining the criticism of more recent years, it has been increasingly adopted as the approach which yields the best results.

Finally, in a more general sense one might criticise the critics of the 1950's for taking themselves too seriously; we see the beginnings of that humourless and dry discussion of literature which is so typical of criticism in the sixties and seventies and which so bores both teachers and students of literature. However, there are those who write with sensitivity and enthusiasm in every period and in the fifties Holloway's,

Brown's and Clifford's work all conveys at least some sense that literature matters to them and to us and is not just to be dissected. In the absence of any suitably prophetic quotation about the direction of Hardy criticism in this period I reproduce here Douglas Bush's warning about the state of Dickens criticism in the late fifties; the parallels are obvious:

The new Dickens has been seen (at least after the first frenzied phase of his career) as a highly conscious and developing artist, a sophisticated molder of symbolic patterns, a savage analyst of society, a half-surrealist creator of the crowded, lonely city, a novelist or novelist-poet to be read as we read Dostoevsky or Kafka or Faulkner.....All this is much to the good, and we may hope for more analysis of the potencies and subtleties of Dickens' art. At the same time it may be hoped that the new criticism of Dickens will not become too severely and solemnly intellectual and analytical. After all, as Mr. Sleary said, "People mutht be amuthed". Some modern critics give the impression of having come to Dickens late in life, perhaps after Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Faulkner (or perhaps after Stendhal, Flaubert, and James).....24.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SIXTIES

Although Hardy's novels received a good deal of critical attention in the 1960's, much of what was written is unoriginal, limited in scope and lacking in vitality. There is great diversity but this is accompanied by a lack of sureness about the direction and purpose of the critical endeavour. Writing retrospectively and generally of the decade René Wellek talks of,

.....the central question that the criticism of the last ten years must make us feel more acutely than ever: what are the limits of arbitrariness? Is there no correct interpretation? Are there no eternal or at least constant standards?<sup>1</sup>.

Malcolm Bradbury too, seems concerned with a similar problem when he comments:

We tend to see literature less as a force for value in society and more as a phenomenon of it.<sup>2</sup>.

He sees 'the new pluralism', as he calls it, as evidence of a weakening of the morale of literary criticism itself and considers that it contains 'a certain loss of certainty about literature as source of values'.

Both these critics point to the incursion of the sociological perspective into literary criticism as a cause of this 'loss of certainty'. Bradbury maintains that,

Ours is a Tocquevilleian age in which the writer must be the ordinary man, and in which the individual signature on anything is in doubt; we are tempted to believe that literature must be written by societies or particular stages in the historical process, rather than by persons.<sup>3</sup>

Wellek is more inclined to see the inadequacy of various critical approaches prevalent in the sixties; he writes of 'sociology and symbol-mongering' as characteristic and has this to say about the psychoanalytic approach:

I shall not deal with the burgeoning psychoanalytic criticism. It seems to me a dreary hunt for sexual symbols or an attempt to put a dead writer on the couch with inadequate means. Literature is here again used as document, as an instrument for something else.<sup>4</sup>

Of all the critical movements in America since The New Criticism, Wellek places most faith in Myth criticism which is, he says, 'most influentially codified in Northrop Frye's 'Anatomy of Criticism (1957)'.

Thus, between them, Bradbury and Wellek point to the main lines of critical development in the 1960's, lines which are largely reflected and represented in criticism of Hardy's novels during this period. Many of the features of this decade could be seen in criticism of the forties and fifties but there is now an increasing hardening of positions and an increased authority in the statement of them. As we saw in the two previous decades, the emphasis upon the poetic and symbolic structure of Hardy's fiction revealed new dimensions to his imaginative craft. The tendency to see the novels as relating to myths, as having a

strong basis in ballad and folklore was also profitable. There was also much to be gained by the kind of sociological approach adopted by Brown and Kettle in the fifties - if only to remind us that the novels are set in history and are not solely mythical or symbolic structures. The application of psychoanalytic techniques to the critical process too, showed that Hardy (like Dickens) was not defective in methods of characterisation but was adopting a different approach from that of the realists and naturalists.

Having said all this, it is also worth mentioning the note of warning sounded by a few critics<sup>5</sup>, about the dangers of trying to find too much significance in the texts and trying to draw too many inferences from them; such concentration on them as aesthetic objects does not do justice to the pleasure of reading novels or to the reader's experience of them as a process. It is worth once again remembering Lawrence's warning that you can't nail anything in the novel down.<sup>6</sup> There was also evidence in the criticism of the fifties particularly, of what now becomes a very marked tendency for criticism to draw its standards of judgement and its points of reference from outside literature. As Bradbury say, it is understandable that criticism should want to locate literature in some larger entity but, he adds,

.....where it becomes dangerous is when it becomes 'axiomatic' that a poetics of literature should be derived in the first instance from outside literature: from theories of expression or structure, from theories about language, or from notional models of society.<sup>7</sup>

As was shown in earlier chapters, in the post-war period it

became clear that the nature of the literary critic had changed; he (or she) was no longer necessarily a creative artist or man of letters but was much more likely to be a paid academic. To quote Bradbury again:

.....we now have a large critical salariat, for whom the methods of literary criticism are the received methods of their (more or less new) profession and the token of their professionalization. It was inevitable that this would lead to a proliferation of methodology, exegesis and abstruse distinctions.<sup>8</sup>

He also notes the emergence of the belief that 'criticism might become a developing discipline analogous to science'. However, as a result of the growth of this 'large critical salariat', of what Ransom so hoped for - Criticism Inc. - new problems arise. There is not only the problem of increased output and of the justification and defence of methods and theories in an increasingly 'scientific' manner, but also the further difficulty that the artist and his art become divorced from the critic and his criticism. This is seen by several commentators of the period as detrimental to the business of criticism because it holds out the danger of criticism losing its central identity and becoming subsumed in other disciplines such as linguistics, history, or philosophy. John Gross passes the following judgement:

Whatever the future holds, the first qualification for being a good critic will always be an interest in literature for what it is, rather than for the ends which it can be made to serve.<sup>9</sup>

This echoes the sentiments of both Bradbury and Wellek.

Patrick Parrinder too, finds it hard to reconcile the differing features of the past and the present in criticism:

Today's widespread borrowing from other disciplines must seem a necessary development. The historical strength of English criticism lay, however, in a quite different affiliation: that to the primary creative process. Today the split between creator and critic has never seemed wider. It is hard to be objective about this.<sup>10</sup>

George Steiner, in Language and Silence, is quite clear about the place and value of criticism in relation to the creative process. Although his view is highly subjective and generalised, it reflects the mood of the time:

Writers write books; critics write about books in an eternity of second-hand. The distinction is immense. Where criticism endures, it does so either because it is a counterpart to creation, because the poetic force of a Coleridge and a T. S. Eliot gives to their judgement the authority of private experience, or because it marks a signal moment in the history of ideas.<sup>11</sup>

The proliferation of books and articles about Hardy's work provides ample evidence of many of the fears which have been voiced here but it should also be said that there are signs amongst critics themselves of an emerging recognition of the need for criticism to take another direction. Those cited here are but a small sample. It is also worth noting that in particular instances - as we shall see - there is some valuable close criticism of the novels which to some extent justifies the existence of the literary critic as a professional with methods and with theories about those critical methods.

(I) The Debate about the 'Sociological' Approach

In the 1950's, as we saw, the work of Arnold Kettle and Douglas Brown showed how this approach could be applied to Hardy's novels. Kettle's essay on Tess was felt to be rather extreme, particularly in its dismissal of all other possible approaches to the novel. Perhaps the fact that he reconsidered his original essay in the sixties (a reconsideration discussed in the previous chapter) testifies to his own recognition of the inflexibility of his interpretation. Douglas Brown's application of the agricultural and social theme to Hardy's fiction was undoubtedly more measured but he too, like Kettle, tended to subordinate characters, events, and settings in the novels to his own reading of nineteenth-century social history.

In this decade discussion about the validity of interpreting Hardy's novels according to criteria derived from politics and social history widens out. Few critics fail to mention it - if only in a dismissive tone. There is further work by Douglas Brown, this time in the form of a short book on The Mayor of Casterbridge,<sup>12</sup> drawing upon many of the same ideas and much of the same material as his earlier book; there is also a more important contribution from Raymond Williams<sup>13</sup>. whose reading of Hardy, whilst illustrating a broadly similar Marxist perspective to that of Kettle and Brown, is much more subtle and closer to what we might feel are Hardy's own concerns. Although it undoubtedly propounds his own thesis, Williams' criticism does see literature as written, in Bradbury's phrase, by 'persons' and not entirely by 'stages in the historical process'.

This is where Williams' approach differs most markedly from that

of Brown or Kettle - he is much more faithful to what is actually in the novels and takes their existence as imaginative artefacts into account. He does not usually slip into the discussion of events in them as accurate reflections of history. For instance, Williams differs from almost all previous critics of Hardy in arguing that Wessex is not portrayed as an idyllic backwater which in its Eden-like innocence is corrupted by the values of the urban and industrial world outside. He judges Wessex to be a society in crisis but sees it as a crisis engendered within, by the forces created by nineteenth century industrial capitalism:

Hardy's characters are subjected to pressures from within the system of living, not from outside it.....This is the real world of Hardy, and it's astonishing how we continue to fail to see it.<sup>14</sup>

While it certainly seems accurate to claim that there are tensions within rural society as Hardy shows it, one wonders quite what Williams means when he refers to this as 'the real world of Hardy.' The phrase seems to imply that previous critics have misread Hardy's universe (unreal = incorrect, untrue); it also implies that Hardy is concerned with the real world or reality in his novels, as opposed to what is imaginary, fanciful and by implication, less important than this 'real' state of affairs. If the real world of Hardy is the one described by Williams, then there is no possibility of any other reading also being real - which seems somewhat inflexible. As it turns out from a greater acquaintance with Williams' critical writing, what he appears to mean by real is that Hardy is concerned with nineteenth century rural England as a society in the process of



actual historical and social change in which all timeless elements are over-ridden 'as for a novelist they must be'.....

.....by the immediate and actual relationships between people, which occur within existing contemporary pressures.....<sup>15</sup>.

Thus real also means contemporary and immediate rather than eternal. Hardy's novels are seen by Williams as dramatising the effects of change upon individuals at a particular historical moment. Because Williams argues that the changes are created within the society, his reading allows more weight to the action of the novels and to the personality and psychology of the characters. In some readings of this kind (Kettle's on Tess is an obvious example) the characters and events are reduced to illustrations of the effect of an inevitable process and we feel that no account is taken of the evident dramatic tension present in the novels. Williams maintains that the major characters are 'never merely illustrations of this change in a way of life.' For him, each has,

.....a dominant personal history, which in psychological terms bears a direct relation to the social character of the change.<sup>16</sup>.

Just as Williams argues for his version of the Hardy world being the 'real' one, so he argues for his version of Hardy the man and artist as real also. He points out, quite rightly, that some of those who have written on Hardy have assumed that he was a peasant from a culturally and educationally impoverished background. This assumption was noticed in the criticism of David Cecil and Williams himself quotes comments by James, Maugham and

Leavis which provide evidence of a patronising attitude to Hardy's art and personality. For Williams, Hardy's skill as a novelist imaginatively documenting the historical moment earns him a place in any 'great tradition' of the novel. As Williams says:

Hardy neither diminished the crisis of his time nor fitted it simply to a pastoral retrospect.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, we have to assume that there was a crisis, some great change, for all periods of history seem to be claimed by someone or other as either explicitly or implicitly in a state of crisis. Whatever the case, Williams clearly thinks there was a crisis and that Hardy saw it as it really was. It is us, and by 'we' he seems to mean the critical fraternity, who have misunderstood Hardy's role as narrator:

.....We have to get beyond the stereotypes of the autodidact and the countryman, and see Hardy in his real identity: both the educated observer and the passionate participant in a period of general and radical change.<sup>18</sup>

The essays on Hardy written by Williams in the 1960's are important to his subsequent work and to his whole critical position because in them he is testing out his ideas for what are two of his most influential books, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence (1970), and The Country and The City (1973).

Interestingly, the 1964 essay on Hardy appears, virtually unchanged, in both books. In the first of these books he argues that Leavis's 'great tradition' of Austen, Eliot, James, and Conrad, is not a true reflection of the English literary tradition in the novel. Williams would wish to establish Dickens

more firmly in that tradition than Leavis allows in The Great Tradition and he would also wish to elevate those writers whom he claims have been called 'our three great autodidacts' - that is, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence. Williams is thus arguing for an alternative 'great tradition' which would start with Dickens and would include these provincial authors whose cultural and educational background he believes to have been as rich if not richer and more imaginatively vital than the public school/Oxbridge educational 'circuit'. Objecting to the description (which he does not specifically attribute to anyone) of the three writers as 'autodidacts' Williams says:

The flat patronage of "autodidact" can be related to only one fact: that none of the three was in the pattern of boarding school and Oxford or Cambridge which by the end of the century was being regarded not simply as a kind of education but as education itself: to have missed that circuit was to have missed being "educated" at all.

And he goes on,

They belong to a cultural tradition much older and more central in this country than the comparatively modern and deliberately exclusive circuit of the "public schools".<sup>19</sup>

Williams is probably right in thinking that some of the prejudice against and the patronage of Hardy have arisen from attitudes of the kind he describes but it would surely also be true to say that he too is guilty of prejudices and preferences which are all too obvious here. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Williams' critical elevation of Hardy to a central place in an enlarged tradition of the novel went a good way towards establishing

him as a major mainline novelist and not just a rather quirky sort of genius on the sidelines.

The contribution of Williams' thinking on Hardy to The Country and The City is rather different. In this work he develops the thesis, first propounded in his 1967 Listener article, that there never was a golden age of idyllic rural peace and harmony but that it has always been an ideal of a time just past and is, in fact, a cultural and literary myth. This fits in with his view that Hardy actually presents country life in a realistic manner and that it is his critics and readers who have interpreted his work as a nostalgic harking back to a better age in the past. Williams' evidence for this view is impressive, even disregarding the Hardy essay, and while we might occasionally tire of the insistence with which he presses his case, it is hard to resist the persuasive rhetoric which is very much part of Williams' critical equipment and one cannot deny his critical ability in discussing individual writers and works.

It is not at all easy to assess Williams' critical work; all admiration must be qualified by an awareness of his over-pre-occupation with the presence of a class system and economic crises in nineteenth century rural society. Yet, in spite of placing too much emphasis on what are often only peripheral to literary matters, there is no question but that rural society as Hardy presents it does show tension within its bounds and has weaknesses which partially cause its own disintegration. John Holloway saw this but explained it biologically rather than sociologically.<sup>20</sup> The point is that unless one accepts that rural society has a measure of responsibility for its own fate there can be little dramatic interest inherent in the novels. One could say the same

of any individual character too - Tess is a case in point - and reach the same conclusion. This opens up the whole question of the relationship between free will and determinism in the novels which I do not wish to discuss further here since it forms part of a debate which will be dealt with later in this chapter.

Beside Williams' criticism on Hardy, Douglas Brown's ideas on The Mayor of Casterbridge seem very rigid in conception. He takes the view that the novel is the tragedy of a society rather than an individual and that it is, moreover, a society in transition. Brown does not ever consider that the two may not be mutually exclusive and that The Mayor might conceivably be both the tragedy of one individual, in the personal sense, and the tragedy of a society. He reads the novel as one of determinism, but it is not the determinism of fate, or nature, or personality which breaks the individual but one of social and economic forces. His argument is based upon the assumption that the old traditional ways of 'organic' rural society are best and that the new world of money and business transactions has taken over from this. Henchard represents old Casterbridge society and is seen as 'bodying forth the plight of his community'. His power is that of a legendary figure, suggesting the scale of sage; he is not interesting or subtle in his own right:

Hardy's psychology has the essential truth and penetration of provincial wisdom, wide reading, tradition, but not creative insight into the human spirit.<sup>21</sup>

The movement of the novel shows the changeover from agricultural traditions to the world of investment and profit (represented by Farfrae) and Henchard represents defeated agricultural man.

Nothing is discovered in the process of this short book; it quite plainly sets out to illustrate a preconceived and rather limited point of view and ends as it began:

All Hardy's art goes into imagining Henchard's death rather as a loss in community than as the extinction of an individual self.<sup>22</sup>.

There must be some doubt about how far this description would approximate to the feelings of most readers at the close of the novel. It is, apart from anything else, too baldly stated.

Irving Howe, in his book on Hardy,<sup>23</sup> takes a line very similar to Brown's in respect of his attitude to rural society. For him, the Wessex that Hardy knew and longed for was 'rural, traditional, fixed in old country ways, rituals and speech'. He too sees the changes being imposed from outside the society and presents Hardy as 'a reluctant witness to its gradual dissolution under the assaults of commerce and industrialism.' An example of how this affects his assessment of the novels it is worth noting his view of Under the Greenwood Tree:

It is a novel that draws its strength from the life of a community still quite sure of itself.<sup>24</sup>.

Yet there is much evidence, even in this early novel, of the weaknesses and the vulnerability of the rural community; it is inaccurate to say that it is 'quite sure of itself.'

While recognising the impact of so-called 'sociological' criticism, several critics in this period take issue with its premises, in

much the manner that I have done. Ian Gregor is one such critic; he objects particularly to the treatment of Wessex as actual social history and to the suggestion that the novels derive their power from the destruction of agriculture, and goes on:

What does attract his (Hardy's) imagination is not individual character but a kind of individual being. And it is failure to give an adequate recognition to this that weakens the approach to Hardy, as elegist for a rural community.<sup>25</sup>

Writing of the various different ways in which Hardy's work has been approached by the critical fraternity over the period since his death, he concludes:

What we seem to be in need of is a view of Hardy's fiction which will bring these various responses - as tragic philosopher, as creator of character, as social historian - into effective relationship with one another.<sup>26</sup>

Gregor does not, himself, offer a solution but, as with Williams, his sense of the inadequacy of Hardy criticism and yet of the centrality of Hardy to the tradition of the novel, leads him to develop and formulate his views more fully in the 1970's - most particularly in his book on Hardy's fiction, The Great Web,<sup>27</sup> which will be dealt with in the next chapter. Broadly speaking, however, one could say that Gregor's views are the opposite to Brown's in that he sees Hardy's development as a novelist as one of increasing internalisation; for instance, writing of Tess, he comments:

It is as if Hardy now sees that the life of a civilisation can be found in a person as well as a time-honoured heath or a time-honoured social community.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, for Gregor, although the community is important, it is largely the development of the individual consciousness that is Hardy's focus of interest. The society is the framework for that focus.

J. C. Maxwell, in his essay, 'The Sociological Approach to The Mayor of Casterbridge',<sup>29</sup> takes issue with Brown over details of the historical period in which that novel is supposed to have been set. Brown, he says, assumes when he writes of Hardy's 'dismay' at 'the agricultural tragedy of 1870-1902' that the late nineteenth century is the period. The evidence for the action of the novel being set so late in the century is, Maxwell says, much less conclusive than Brown suggests. In fact, as he argues, there is some evidence which points to the setting being around the mid-century;<sup>30</sup> this was before the repeal of the Corn Laws and hence calls into question Brown's thesis about Hardy responding to 'the agricultural tragedy' in this novel. The evidence on both sides, as Maxwell notes, is somewhat flimsy, since Hardy does not encourage us to date the novel precisely and makes ambiguous and misleading statements within the tale. However, as critics like Brown and Kettle have chosen to introduce an element of historical chronology into the debate about Hardy's fiction it is important that it should be proved to be accurate.

A further objection which Maxwell makes to Brown's criticism of The Mayor is relevant here. He maintains that Henchard is not,



as Brown suggests, 'a representative protagonist' but a highly individual and exceptional man:

Brown would have him also representative of a fate that is later - a good deal later - going to overtake the agricultural community as a whole. This is surely a very unsatisfactory kind of juggling both with time and with the relation between naturalism and something that can hardly be seen as falling short of allegory. Hardy's art just does not have the feel of being like this.<sup>31</sup>

Maxwell does not go on to say quite what Hardy's art does 'feel' like. Like Gregor, he voices dissatisfactions with Hardy criticism - particularly the sociological variety - and suggests that there may be other possibilities - but in a rather vague way. They both adopt the same terminology too, insisting upon the need for emphasis in criticism upon the 'feel' of the work. Where Maxwell wrote of Hardy's art not having 'the feel of being like this', Gregor asserts that,

Criticism ought to be able not only to analyse the meaning of a book but to convey something of what it feels like to read it. Whatever reservations analysis may suggest about Tess, a reader's general impression is one of deeply 'felt life'.<sup>32</sup>

Both Maxwell and Gregor are suggesting a more flexible and open approach to the act of criticising Hardy's novels but in terms of how this might be practised they offer little of specific value at this stage although, as I stated earlier, Gregor takes the matter up in the next decade.<sup>33</sup> For the moment a final glance at one of his warnings is a hint of his hopes for the

direction of criticism in the next decade and after:

.....the primary business of the literary critic must be to try to understand and make clear the specific nature of these novels; he must abstain from drilling them into general formulations of his own devising. What conclusions there are about the moral and the story lie in the particular analyses of this or that novel, and the present chapter can only be an attempt to complement these by taking the whole subject and looking at it from a dominantly historical point of view. To think in terms of anything nearer to a summarising pattern than this would be illusion.....<sup>33</sup>.

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, it would be possible to quote many reservations expressed by critics about the value of this particular critical approach to Hardy's novels. To cite many more would be tedious; suffice it to say that the main objection expressed is that a reading of the novels as works about the fate of societies rather than individuals is not only too deterministic, too cut and dried in every way, but that such a reading does not correspond to the experience of the novels. As a final comment on the matter, I quote the view of Roy Morrell, who articulates the case well. In the course of a general assessment of Hardy criticism he writes of,

.....that other stand-by of Hardy criticism today: that Hardy's aim was to record the old agricultural way of life, and that his pessimism was despair as he saw the old order defeated by the machine.....This view has been put forward not just on insufficient evidence, but in the face of much evidence to the contrary.<sup>35</sup>.

Morrell's sense of incredulity at the possibility of accommodating this approach to his own experience in reading the novels

echoes that of Gregor and Maxwell. He finds it a view:

.....impossible, surely, to reconcile with the most moving experience of reading any of Hardy's masterpieces: the sense he conveys to us of the preciousness of the individual and the sometimes desperate need of that individual for love and understanding.<sup>36</sup>

The sense of there being something false about such an interpretation of Hardy's work, logical as it may seem in argument, indicates the inadequacy of the conception of criticism as a systematic and scientific activity where books serve theories rather than helping to form them. There comes a point, which has obviously been reached in the case of sociological criticism in the sixties, when the gap between the critical perspective and the reader's feelings about the novel is too wide to be easily bridged. It should be added, however, that many of those who object to the sociological reading of the novels, object to it in its crassest form. A critic like Raymond Williams, though he writes from a left-wing perspective, never states his case quite as baldly as Kettle or Brown and as was shown (see p.261) is sensitive to the claims of individual characters within the framework of his social reading. The contribution of this critical approach to Hardy criticism as a whole is actually a much more positive one than it seemed to many of these critics in the sixties - there had not yet been time for it to be assimilated into a more comprehensive picture of Hardy's fictional world and its detractors seem to have felt themselves, among other things, to be championing old freedoms against new restrictions, in both a political and a literary sense.

(II) The Art of the Novels

In The Moral and The Story, Ian Gregor comments thus:

.....while we may appreciate the fact that the James novel is only one kind of novel, we have yet to appreciate that James's criticism is only one kind of criticism.<sup>37</sup>.

By this, as he goes on to explain, Gregor means the tendency for criticism to emphasise technique, to expect the novel to speak for itself, to be 'artistic' and not interfered with by authorial comment or summarising abstractions. In his view the development of technique in both creative and critical writing has led to 'a fine ability to treat more and more of less and less'. He also, as noted in the previous section, exhorts critics of the novel to abstain from 'drilling them into general formulations.' Philip Larkin too, in his essay, 'Wanted: Good Hardy Critic', appears most despairing about the situation:

It may be that Hardy is just not the sort of writer that criticism can do much for, because the old-style approach- His Pessimism, His Female Characters - is really no more successful than the new. Or it may be that the true critic of Hardy has not so far materialised.<sup>38</sup>.

There is a strong sense in this period that the kind of close attention to technique which focusses on structural coherence and demands consistency of method and purpose, is just not appropriate to criticism of Hardy's novels but there is, in general, a corresponding sense of not knowing how else to approach the art of the novels. Many critics comment on the fact that his work

is particularly unyielding before the onslaught of most critical methods. Gregor considers that his sensibility was ahead of his expression and that this accounts for the 'stresses and strains' in his writing; Lodge maintains that Hardy confuses the reader with 'conflicting linguistic clues', leaving him bewildered, and concludes that there is in Hardy's novels 'a sense of greatness not quite achieved'. Both Lodge and R. B. Heilman write specifically on Hardy's language and style and will be dealt with later but it is worth noting that both critics see his writing in terms of discord and inconsistency.

Indeed, discord, inconsistency and even incongruity have been terms often used in criticism of Hardy's novels in the post-war period and much of the criticism in the 1960's draws heavily upon the work of earlier critics such as Zabel and Guerard and advances little that is new in ideas or method.

Richard Carpenter for example, in his book on Hardy, stresses the same facets of Hardy's art as Guerard. Hardy is seen as an anti-realist who ironically juxtaposes the macabre and grotesque with the ordinary:

His most memorable scenes have the nightmarish quality of Kafka's or Dostoevski's work and throughout the bulk of Hardy's fiction and poetry runs this thread of the grotesque.<sup>39</sup>

This clearly echoes the criticism of Zabel, Guerard and Emma Clifford in the forties and fifties. Carpenter also draws on the psychoanalytic approach in his criticism, noting that sexual passion in Hardy is revealed through dreams and

symbolic acts. As he says, critics have been slow to recognise this side of Hardy's work, but he does not offer much detailed criticism himself of the way in which such a method illuminates Hardy's artistic purpose. Carpenter's is typical of most of the derivative criticism of the period in its insistence on the importance of the archetypal and mythic elements in the world of Wessex and in its concentration on Hardy's use of folk material. For him, plot, social realism, characterisation and humour are superficialities; we value Hardy for his mastery of myth, symbol, impressionism and dramatic unity. Carpenter is equally uninspired and conventional in his criticism of Hardy for his clumsy and careless style, his manipulation of plot and his shallowness of characterisation. Hardy's ineptitudes can, however, be tolerated he adds, because his honesty and his 'universal qualities' overcome this. A further unexamined conventionality subscribed to by Carpenter is one which reveals the very Jamesian critical perspective which Lodge felt to be so restricting to critical practice. This occurs when Carpenter likens Hardy's discursive speculation in the novels to 'lumps of uncooked porridge', and adds rather patronisingly:

.....the wonder is that so many readers have found these lumps so tasty.<sup>40</sup>

So Carpenter's Hardy is a figure whose work appears to be flawed in many major respects but who - and once again we meet this qualification - succeeds in spite of them.

Another example of a critical contribution which does little more than pay lip service to current critical fashion is that of F. R. Karl on The Mayor of Casterbridge. Karl manages to

combine sociological and psychological perspectives in his interpretation of the novel. One of his comments on Jude illustrates this:

Hardy turned the Victorian lower-class "hero" into an unreasonable, guilt-stricken, and alienated figure who is denied even the saving powers of nature.<sup>41</sup>

His view of The Mayor follows similar lines; he declares that it marks a turning point in the development of the English novel because it is not just social document but reveals a 'significant psychological history'.

Karl also compares Hardy with Dickens - again a borrowed idea - and links them as writers attempting a new kind of subconscious realism of psychological probing. Both were, he says:

.....aware of the self-destructive demons nourished within an otherwise respectable and controlled individual.<sup>42</sup>

This all sounds very familiar, quite irrespective of its truth and value,<sup>43</sup> and lends weight to John Gross' observation:

The truth is that unless you are either a critic of the first rank, or lucky enough to be caught up in a major revolution in taste, there are likely to be a limited number of original things which you have to say about any author who has been widely discussed already.<sup>44</sup>

A similar approach which also lacks vitality is taken by Irving Howe in his critical work on Hardy. Howe's is a good

solid introductory book but tends to draw much upon established critical opinion. Like his North American colleagues, Karl and Carpenter, Howe stresses the psychological depth of Hardy's novels (one is reminded of Wellek's talk of 'the burgeoning psychoanalytic criticism'). Hardy's characters are, for him, embodiments of ruling passions or obsessions, and his fictional method is seen as one which combines traditional ballad and folklore with the techniques of modernist fiction:

Hardy is trying to say through the workings of chance what later writers will try to say through the vocabulary of the unconscious.<sup>45</sup>

Howe, like Carpenter and a host of earlier critics is very critical of Hardy's plots and concludes that because of their creaking 'Victorian' nature,

His novels are therefore likely to seem curiously uneven: the men and women he imagines are superbly vital, while the events he assigns to them are frequently beyond their bearing on our belief.<sup>46</sup>

In reply to this one might argue that the plots are much more 'of a piece' with the rest of the novel than Howe suggests. They may not adhere to strict notions of probability and may indeed carry events that are beyond the bearing of the characters but are they really beyond belief? Is it not a case of 'the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'? There is much more 'sense' to Hardy's plots than is suggested by the curt dismissal they so often receive.

Howe also singles out certain kinds of scenes which do not strike



him as artistically sound. The sleep-walking scene in Tess is described as 'incredible', again revealing the same preconceptions about probability and logic. The presentation of Little Father Time, too, meets with much the same reaction and causes Howe to comment:

Such mixtures of psychological veracity and crude melodrama are characteristic of Hardy, a novelist almost always better in parts than the whole.<sup>47</sup>

Howe's criticism betrays Jamesian preconceptions again—the assumption that a novel must have coherence and wholeness and must be consistent in its techniques. This can be seen particularly in the above assumption that 'psychological veracity' and 'crude melodrama' must necessarily be at odds with one another, and not the latter a means to the former, which is often the case in Hardy as in Dickens. Hardy is bold in his artistic strokes and not given to that kind of intricacy and subtlety so favoured by many professional critics at this time. This is what leads to the paradox of a growing critical certainty of his power and genius accompanied by a corresponding inability to account for it in terms of current methods of analysis or theories of form.

Alan Alvarez's essay on Jude<sup>48</sup> marks a positive advance upon the critical tendency to limit discussion of the novel to its violation of canons of realism and probability and to whether Jude is weak and ineffectual or Sue a neurotic New Woman figure. The problem with his criticism is that it rather overstates the case for the novel as a psychological study. Like Raymond Williams, though in a rather different framework, Alvarez

demonstrates that the book draws its strength from tensions within the characters and action and that their fate is not determined by external circumstances:

Despite the social criticism it involves, the tragedy of Jude is not one of missed chances but of missed fulfillment, of frustration.....Jude's tragedy, like every true tragedy, comes from inner tensions which shape the action, not from any haphazard or indifferent force of circumstance.<sup>49</sup>.

Alvarez sees Jude's emotional and psychological 'inner tensions' as being at the heart of the novel; he argues that everything else in it is subordinate to our sense of this character's isolation and loneliness. Sue and Arabella are largely important as they illuminate and dramatise Jude's own dilemmas and are described by Alvarez as 'the white and black horses, the noble and base instincts which drew Plato's chariots of the soul'. The novel is, then, fundamentally a work without any heroines at all. It has only a hero. This is what I meant by my comment that Alvarez overstates his case. While drawing welcome attention to the importance of psychological and emotional states in Jude, it does so at the cost of reducing the novel, and particularly these characters, to a formula. Both Arabella and Sue are surely more than mere projections of Jude's alienated state, more than elements of a design. We are back to Gregor and Maxwell's objections to sociological criticism - that it does not feel like this when we read the novel. Alvarez treats Jude as poetic and dramatic and refers to it in terms of both, but hardly considers it as a novel:

.....it is a supremely vivid dramatization of the state of mind out of which Hardy's poetry emerged.....The power of Jude the Obscure is, then less fictional than poetic.....It is a tragedy whose unity is not Aristotelian but emotional.<sup>50</sup>

Thus for Alvarez the novel is 'Hardy's last and finest' because of its emotional unity which approximates to what he implies is the superior art of poetry. Once again we see the critical preference for wholeness of vision being expressed.

Tony Tanner's critical essay, 'Colour and Movement in Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles'<sup>51</sup>. makes what appears at first sight to be an unusual claim for Hardy's art:

For all Henry James's scrupulous indirectness, Hardy's art is more truly impersonal.<sup>52</sup>

However, Tanner's explanation for such a claim is convincing, for he draws attention to the fact that reflection and perception are kept separate in Hardy's work; that is, that Hardy keeps distant from the people and objects of which his tale is composed. Such an observation about Hardy's stance as a narrator prefigures the much fuller discussion of the subject in J. Hillis Miller's Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (1970) which will be examined in detail in the next chapter. The 'illusion', as Tanner calls it, of distance is what gives Hardy's novels the sense of anonymity which we find in folktales and ballads:

In the vast empty landscapes of Hardy's world, people's paths cross according to some more mysterious logic.<sup>53</sup>

It is a world in which logic and plausibility are defied and which is notable for its 'graphic crudity of effect' from which much of the artistic power is derived.

Tanner's is an important study because it is one of the first to look closely at reasons why certain effects have been achieved in Hardy's novels and because Tanner is one of only a few critics up to this time to consider Hardy's position as a narrator in his novels. He does not try to look for what is not there in Tess but starts from precisely what is there which is, as he says, a kind of crudity and anonymity which defies normal logic. Having asserted this he goes on to investigate the way in which the bold, unsubtle patterning of red and white contributes to the overall art of Tess:

Watching Tess's life we begin to see that her destiny is nothing more or less than the colour red.<sup>54</sup>

This kind of boldness, once it is pointed out, seems obvious (it was the same with J. O. Bailey's 'Mephistophelian Visitants' article) but it is only because we have often registered it unconsciously and it seems a perfectly legitimate task of criticism to bring such patterning to our conscious attention.

Tanner is careful to avoid describing the use of the colours red and white as symbolic; indeed, he explicitly states that this is not the case:

The world of the book is indeed a world of omens (not symbols) in which things and events echo in patterns deeper than lines of rational cause and effect.<sup>55</sup>

As becomes clear in the course of discussion, Tanner means by 'omen' something approximating to an image but he wishes by using the word 'omen' to convey the sense of foreboding in the way the various images are patterned in Tess and foreshadow her fate.

For Tanner, the structure of the novel is mythical. Tess is pure and white but even she, being mortal, begins in sex (blood) and ends in death (blood):

.....and Hardy constantly shows how closely allied the two forms of blood-letting are in one basic, unalterable rhythm of existence.<sup>56</sup>

To reinforce this alliance Tanner notes how Hardy presents the sun ambiguously - sometimes it is associated with redness and sometimes with whiteness. Tess herself is presented as 'a moving spot on a white vacuity' - a 'pictorial reduction' which is, for Tanner, 'right at the heart of Hardy's vision.' Tanner concludes that we are perhaps wrong to be too literal and pedantic in our discussion of Tess' suffering. Hardy apportions the blame amongst a number of causes:

.....a bit on Tess, a bit on society, a bit on religion, a bit on heredity, a bit on the Industrial Revolution, a bit on the men who abuse her, a bit on the sun and the stars, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

Tanner is right in saying that much criticism has focussed on these social and moral issues in Tess perhaps, as with Jude, at the expense of close examination of the nature of Hardy's art. His final comment shows his own position on the matter:

Hardy does not work in this way.  
More than make us judge, Hardy makes  
us see.<sup>58</sup>

If we accept that it is the role of the critic as well as the artist to 'make us see', then Tanner can be said to have achieved this - if only in small measure. Much of Hardy's artistry is now recognised as dependent upon pictorial effects; criticism of the seventies and eighties has increasingly investigated this, but Tanner is, I think, alone at this time in sensing the importance of colour and visual images in Tess, and in seeing that the effects of such images (or omens as he calls them) are cumulative and progressive rather than being part of a symbolic pattern or mythical structure which can, as it were, be extracted and separated from the body of the novel.

Some of the awkwardness and falsity of criticism in the 1960's arises precisely because the story and the significance of the story - or sometimes it is the content and the form - are treated separately. If, for instance, we think of the criticism looked at earlier in this chapter, that by Carpenter, Howe and Karl, we can see that this was generally the case. It is as if the critic approaches the task by feeling that he must have something to say about the meaning as a complete unit and about the form as a coherent entity, in other words about the novel as a fixed structure outside of time and irrespective of the reading process. This kind of approach, with its tendency to provide what seem like absolute and final interpretations is less appropriate for novel criticism than it is for poetry or painting; the novel is not so compact nor so clearly shaped, and while one can certainly say that it has form and structure and unified wholeness - up to a

point - there is always a sense in which it defies this kind of approach because our attitudes to it and opinions of it change as we read. Thus, perhaps a better way of criticising Hardy and one which critics of the seventies and eighties increasingly adopt would be to allow for the flux of the novel and to return to a more leisurely method of commentary and descriptive attention to the text and to forget about having to say something theoretically significant which summarises the whole. What seems to be needed, as is revealed by the inadequacy of many critical interpretations of Hardy's work in this decade, is a method which will provide, as Gregor and Maxwell suggest, some sense of what it 'feels like' to read a Hardy novel. This means, I think, that the interpretation and description of Hardy's art as a novelist must start from the text and could perhaps take into account his own concerns and those of his culture; it should not proceed only from notions of the critic's own about Society or Freud, Linguistics or Myth, which are then imposed upon the work in hand, often to show only how cleverly the critic himself can argue a case.

A critic who does focus admirably on the text and upon the issue of Hardy's intentions is R. B. Heilman. His essay, 'Hardy's Mayor and the Problem of Intention'<sup>59</sup>. is an intelligent and stimulating piece of criticism, and both raises and clarifies some of the points just discussed about the nature of criticism. Heilman's starting point is the vexed question of how far the author's intention is relevant to literary study. He notes that academic opinion is still sharply divided on the matter and makes it clear that he does not subscribe to the view that authors should set out purposely to 'design' their work in the sense that they necessarily must have an overall intention. In

support of his case, Heilman cites John Bayley whom, he says, in his book The Characters of Love (1961), has made the distinction between the drawing of characters from "Nature", and the construing of them as elements of design. Heilman continues:

Drawing characters from nature means yielding to them, acknowledging their autonomy, letting them get unruly..... Design implies a subjection of character to role, whether this be the maintenance of a certain ordering of parts (the novel as formal garden) or the illustration of a chosen point of view of sensibility (the novel as treatise). In Mr. Bayley's sense of alternatives is a different framing of the problem of intention: "design" means a pre-arrangement of mind and will, in opposition to that uncircumscribed working of imagination by which characters in nature may be apprehended and recreated in their fullness.<sup>60</sup>

Heilman sees this emphasis on design as a characteristic of modern literature. Anticipating the moderns, Hardy (particularly in his later novels) clearly set out to design his fiction, as Heilman says, 'in terms of some special aim or philosophical preoccupation'. However, in Hardy's case, the design tended to give way before the need for vitality - in characterisation above all:

He unconsciously surrendered constricting intention to artistic need; or, in other terms that I will return to later, his "imaginative intention" replaced his "intellectual intention".<sup>61</sup>

Hardy's work presents an especially interesting example of the relationship between what Heilman terms imaginative and intellectual intention because, as a typically Victorian



'talkative' narrator, he is able to discuss what he is doing in the process of doing it. James explained his method in Prefaces, as did Hardy, but these are at a remove from the text and stand away from it; Hardy also incorporates his intentions into the very act of composition in a way James did not:

.....he shifts on a single page from impersonal story-teller to personal explicator and direction-giver. He provides us with unusually authentic data for comparing intention and execution.<sup>62</sup>

Having established the basis of his argument, Heilman goes on to demonstrate its validity by reference to The Mayor of Casterbridge. In that novel Hardy 'intends' Susan Henchard to be passive and downtrodden but she turns out to have more than a dash of independence; she is, in fact, quite cunning and determined. Heilman then makes much the same kind of point about Jude where Hardy clearly 'intends' to show the system getting individuals down but where he picks as victims,

people of such intense inner discords and disturbances they are inevitable victims who would go down in any system less than Utopian.<sup>63</sup>

Heilman concludes from his examination that Hardy is at his greatest, 'when his impressions escape from all demonstrative intentions', and states clearly his belief that Hardy's characters have freedom of choice within the fictional universe he creates:

Hardy treats characters far less as victims than as moral beings whose histories are congruent with their

natures, and his sense of characters is profound and many-sided enough to forbid any inference of a rigid single-valued cosmology.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Heilman is arguing that Hardy's fictional characters have a life of their own and are not subordinated to 'role', as Bayley put it. Whatever Hardy's consciously framed intention may have been as to their purpose in his philosophical or artistic design, their strength (and hence the strength of his fiction) lies in their ability to withstand such subordination and to live imaginatively in their world and in the mind of the reader. Heilman is saying, then, that imaginative vision, working as it were unconsciously, has saved Hardy's fiction from his own designs for it.

This same view of the Hardy universe as one which allows for freedom of choice and action is taken by Roy Morrell in his book, Thomas Hardy - The Will and The Way. Morrell claims that Hardy was not a pessimist and that it is critics who have given him this label - quite undeservedly in view of what Morrell terms Hardy's 'very tentative and questioning formulations'. He adds:

If modern critics misrepresent Hardy, I believe it is because in all good faith they are unable to set aside the bulk of established criticism.<sup>65</sup>

Criticism of Hardy, says Morrell, is based upon two assumptions: firstly, a belief in 'pessimistic determinism', and secondly 'an abiding faith in the goodness of nature and of the old agricultural order'. As examples of critics whom he believes make these two assumptions, he cites Lawrence, Brown, Kettle and

John Holloway. His tone is dismissive:

Man's roots in Nature, the essential goodness of the agricultural communities, the contempt for the deraciné, these are the preoccupations of a generation influenced by Jung, Lawrence, Sturt and Leavis.....It tells us much of the modern attitude; nothing about Hardy.<sup>66</sup>.

One might be inclined to be persuaded more thoroughly by Morrell's view if he were not so peremptory and dismissive in tone. He is particularly keen to attack John Holloway's critical stance but one feels he bears some personal animosity towards the critic or what he is supposed to stand for. This may not be the case, but it certainly appears to be, as for instance when Morrell accuses Holloway of 'distortions' which finally lead us 'well out of the sight of truth'. In this rhetorical question, too, there is a valuable element which is marred by the manner of expression:

Are not the critics with their crudifications destroying the richness and variety of our literature and blunting out tastes?<sup>67</sup>.

Basically Morrell is making much the same sort of protest about the inflexibility of the systematising urge in modern criticism that is also made by Heilman, and as we saw earlier, by Gregor and others. It is true that much of the 'sociological' criticism, as well as that which might be termed 'philosophical', has tended to see Hardy as a pessimist and a determinist; it is also true that much modern criticism has foisted on to Hardy its own preoccupations; but it is not the case that Roy Morrell is the sole or the first commentator on Hardy to realise this.

Morrell himself might likewise be accused of doing just this since he interprets Hardy's universe according to his own robust and no-nonsense attitude to life. He argues, for instance, that in Hardy's novels, as in the philosophy of existentialism, choice is shown as being in a limited sense 'free' (i.e. in so far as one is not wholly a product of heredity and environment) and that even a choice not to choose is, ultimately, still a choice to be made alone and 'in anguish'. We might, thus, apply this to Tess's passivity and accuse her, as Morrell does, of acts of 'mauvaise foi'. This is how readers often do respond to the character of Tess and Morrell argues his case persuasively here. No-one can really deny that Tess is a victim of society, fate, heredity, but whether she can be said to be a victim of her own personality is another matter. If Morrell's reading of existentialism is applied then Tess assumes a measure of responsibility for her fate because you cannot claim that you could not act any differently because you are such-and-such by nature; this is an act of deception, of bad faith. Where such a conception of limited freedom and responsibility seems to be appropriate to an interpretation of Hardy is in its accounting for what readers often feel, for some dramatic tension and suspense, some sense that Tess might have acted otherwise and that the outcome might have been different. Morrell goes further than a discussion of Tess alone by claiming that:

It is difficult to recall one of Hardy's novels or stories which does not at some point or other focus our attention upon the meaning of choice; but in four or five, what we may call the 'agony of choice' is a major theme, worked out in an intricate pattern of choices and rechoices, whilst some degree of freedom is lost or attained.<sup>68</sup>

Having constructed a most stimulating defence of the existence of free will in the Hardy world, Morrell again rounds on Hardy's critics as a group when he suggests that they cannot face up to life as he did; they write about him as they do because they are appalled by,

.....the courage of his attitude, his sense of man's responsibility, and his insistence that man can achieve something, as Oak and one or two others do, alone.<sup>69</sup>.

This kind of comment, which reads like a lesson in self-help that would appeal to today's Tory government is not, in my view, appropriate to criticism. It is enough that Morrell has effectively argued his case for Hardy not being a pessimist; to then go on to make Hardy out to be advocating entrepreneurial skills, is another matter. Thus, while Morrell's contribution to criticism is in arguing for a broader and more tolerant approach to criticising Hardy, his own denunciations of the ideas and attitudes of other critics and his over-authoritative tone, convey an intolerance and pompousness which are at times quite offensive.

In his article, 'Wanted: Good Hardy Critic',<sup>70</sup> which is based upon a review of Morrell's book, Philip Larkin concentrates upon criticising Morrell adversely for his over-insistence on the power of Hardy's individuals to control and to be held responsible for their actions. It is, says Larkin, too extreme to claim that Tess got what she deserved and that all Hardy's praise goes out to the Oaks and Farfraes ' who meet reverses with increased determination and eventually master their environments'.<sup>71</sup> As Larkin notes, Morrell selects his quotations carefully to support

his own thesis. There are a number of points arising from Morrell's criticism and from Larkin's response to it which need noting. It would, for instance, be wrong to dismiss Morrell's criticism as valueless, because it does, if nothing else, provide a corrective to the rather stereo-typed view of Hardy as a pessimist, harking back nostalgically to a golden age of agriculture and seeing man as trapped by society, fate or whatever. Unfortunately, as Larkin suggests, this critical perspective of Morrell's drives too far in the opposite direction so that the picture which emerges is of Hardy as 'a kind of Crypto-Shaw'. Thus, while denouncing fellow critics for their blinkered vision, Morrell proves that he too is blinkered. So far as Larkin himself goes, he seems to belong to the growing group of British critics who are insisting upon critical interpretations being more faithful to the experience of reading the text. This is a kind of 'commonsense' approach, one which is far more provisional in its conclusions. Larkin's comment here demonstrates the tone:

Having re-read Tess for the purpose of this review, I cannot believe that Hardy meant by it anything remotely resembling Mr. Morrell's thesis. To me it comes over as a blend of Victorian melodrama with the older tradition of the ballad: Tess herself would be equally at home in either.<sup>72</sup>

As Larkin also points out, there are absurdities in the narrative of the novel, 'but these do not matter, any more than the inconsistencies in Shakespeare's time-schemes'. His point is that structure, philosophy and so on are not at the heart of Hardy's art, what is needed in criticism is 'extended consideration of the centrality of suffering in Hardy's work' and Larkin

feels that such a consideration 'should be the first duty of the true critic for which the work is still waiting'. For him, 'suffering' does not imply, as it does for Morrell, a negative quality or characters as passive victims - quite the reverse:

.....the presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative quality - not the mechanical working out of some pre-determined allegiance to pessimism or any other concept, but the continual imaginative celebration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development.<sup>73</sup>.

Naturally, this statement of Larkin's tells us much about his own attitude to life and his close affinity with Hardy's artistic vision; but, even if we disagree with his assessment of 'suffering' as central to Hardy's work (and it would be hard to do so), Larkin's criticism must be given credit for its fidelity to his experience of reading Hardy. He is immersed in Hardy's art and outlook and proceeds from a consideration of that to his conclusions; he does not, as some critics do, approach the work with a preconceived theory and set out to apply it systematically in the face of evidence against his case. Ultimately Larkin's critical position is not so very far from Morrell's; both feel that Hardy's fiction is more positive and affirmative than the determinist view would allow for but where Morrell sees solid individual achievement in the evolutionary struggle (Oak, Forfrae) as a source of hope, Larkin sees the ability to suffer, to learn from pain as a positive contribution of Hardy's art.

### (III) Linguistic and Stylistic Criticism

In this section it is my intention to examine the work of Heilman and Lodge on Hardy's style, in order to illustrate the continuing difficulties criticism experienced during this decade in coming to terms with the peculiar nature of Hardy's language and style-or styles-of writing. As Heilman rightly points out in introducing his essay:

Sighing about Hardy's style is a fairly old game among critics of the novel, and one could make quite an anthology of despairing and witty observations about Hardy's verbal manners.<sup>74</sup>

And he goes on to note that, paradoxically:

Hardy is all of a piece by being, in so many different ways, not all of a piece.<sup>75</sup>

Thus Heilman focusses upon what he terms 'the singular Hardian discord' which manifests itself in the discord between Hardy as thinker and as artist, and also in the 'gaucheness' of some of his writing as compared with his ability to be 'concrete, flexible, accurate'. Hardy lacks consistency in his style and Heilman quotes various examples to show how very awkward Hardy's diction and syntax can be. He also quotes some direct and fluent pieces which illustrate his ability at its highest. Heilman finds this inconsistency puzzling:

It is as though he were riding a by no means dashing, but extremely perverse and wilful, horse, which he has little control over, but which at its own irrationally changing pace, with its



slovenly or stiff-jointed gait, and by its own circuitous route eventually takes him into the general neighbourhood of his destination.<sup>76</sup>

Heilman's essay is subtitled 'Notes on Style' and it is really just that - a series of observations without any particular conclusion. He notes Hardy's propensity for an indirectness which is closer to 'the language of offices and business rather than of art'; he also notes Hardy's liking for abstraction, his addiction to polysyllabic words and what he calls his 'quasi-classical style'. The other, or 'concrete' style, contrasts with this in its directness, detail and particularity. This same changing from directness to indirectness is characteristic of his role as narrator too and in his inconsistent rendering of dialogue. It is a style full of surprises. The only conclusion Heilman seems to be able to reach about it is that the style reflects Hardy himself as both "uncommon man" and "common man" and to comment that the two 'are fused in the particular Hardian excellence which evokes such identifying terms as strength, integrity, and vision', <sup>77</sup>.

As a description of Hardy's language and style, Heilman's work is detailed and often accurate but he bases his writing always on the assumption that there is definitely something discordant in it. He could possibly have described the different styles Hardy uses in terms of richness and variety rather than discord. This raises another question too, of how far it can be assumed that Hardy's 'clumsy' or 'indirect' manner of writing is in fact a fault of his work as a whole. Is it discordant? Or is it perhaps that our criteria (or Heilman's at least) are wrong and that we expect consistency in style as much as we expect unity

of structure and coherence of outlook? If Hardy's style can be said to give an impression of 'strength, integrity, and vision' then it might be more profitable to investigate how this effect is achieved rather than to continue in the 'in spite of' mode where Hardy is seen as a writer who rises about such details as syntax and diction to achieve an intuitive greatness which somehow does not depend upon the supposed flaws in his writing.

David Lodge's, 'Tess, Nature and the Voices of Hardy',<sup>78</sup> does not prove to be much of an advance on earlier criticism of the style, although at the outset he hopes that it will be. In introducing his subject, Lodge reminds us of Vernon Lee's comment that Hardy 'belongs to a universe transcending such trifles as Writers and Readers and their little logical ways'. Lee's criticism (as was noted in Chapter Two), like Heilman's, constitutes an evasion of the issue. Lodge's comment shows his own position:

This disingenuous conclusion conceals either a failure of nerve before the Great Reputation, or an admission that the total effect of Tess is rather more impressive than the analysis suggests.<sup>79</sup>

That 'the total effect of Tess is rather more impressive than the analysis suggests' is a comment which might apply not only to Vernon Lee's stylistic criticism but to most if not all criticism of Hardy's style to date. One has hopes that Lodge will provide a more useful reading but this is not the case. Lodge sees Hardy as a figure somewhere between the semi-literate blunderer and the majestic figure transcending ordinary critical standards. Here he draws upon Raymond Williams' Hardy who is both 'passionate participant' and 'educated observer'; according to Lodge the

tensions in Hardy's style are reflections of the tension in him and his work between the educated and peasant worlds. This is not dissimilar to Heilman's Hardy whose discordant style reflects his being both 'uncommon' and 'common' man. According to Lodge - and this seems to me to be his most important contribution - there are not only two styles nor only two narrative voices, but a whole range of notes and tones between the two extremes. As an example of Hardy's use of several voices Lodge cites the threshing scene in Tess and comments:

The author here is a combination of sceptical philosopher, and local historian, topographer, antiquarian, mediating between his 'folk' - the agricultural community of Wessex - and his readers - the metropolitan 'quality'.<sup>80</sup>

He then looks fairly closely at examples of Hardy's different 'persona' but rather than finding strength in the range and variety of Hardy's style, Lodge (like Heilman) sees mainly discord and duality. He feels that there is duality in the presentation of Tess's consciousness between author and character, and that we find this same duality also in the presentation of nature which is seen as both beneficent and cruel. This duality or, as he comes to term it, 'ambiguity' of presentation is, for Lodge, an element which 'confuses the reader with a number of conflicting linguistic clues'. Readings of particular scenes (the seduction scene and Tess in the wild garden are given as examples) often depend upon whether one takes the observing consciousness to be Tess's or the author's. Lodge clearly sees such lack of clarity as a fault of style:

It is as if Hardy, bewildered by the rich possibilities of the scene, has confused himself and us by trying to follow out all of them at the same time.<sup>81</sup>

And he concludes that:

Hardy is a peculiarly difficult novelist to assess because his vices are almost inextricably entangled with his virtues..... Alternatively dazzled by his sublimity and exasperated by his bathos, false notes, confusions, and contradictions, we are, while reading him, tantalized by a sense of greatness not quite achieved.<sup>82</sup>

Within the terms set by Lodge, his criticism of Hardy's style and use of language is clearly stated and well backed up by examples from Tess. But, like Heilman's, Lodge's terms betray a set of assumptions about good and bad writing and fail to get beyond what was fast becoming another stereotype of Hardy, as a deeply divided and alienated figure whose style reflects his being placed uncomfortably between two different classes or cultures. In his art as in his life Hardy was, I think, much more accomplished and sophisticated than these critics make him out to be. As more recent criticism has suggested, and as we shall see in the next chapter, he was - if not at ease - at least more comfortable with his writing and his narrative stance, and was a more deliberate and self-conscious artist than he is usually held to be. As I have suggested, it is quite possible that their criteria for judging Hardy's art in his novels needed some adjustment and alteration. The criticism of Hardy's language and his style as a whole, merely highlights what has been a persistent theme in Hardy criticism in this as in earlier periods - that he is a great writer but one whose work cannot, it seems, be

proved to be great through explication or analysis. This definitely suggests that the wrong criteria are being applied.

The most important and interesting feature of criticism of Hardy's fiction in the decade 1960-1970 is, then, not so much what it reveals about Hardy's art - there is little that is fresh or helpful - but rather, what it reveals about the state of criticism in general and about attitudes and approaches to the novel in particular. Several critics, as we have seen, deplore the growth of criticism as a profession and attribute the lack of vitality of much critical writing to the resultant divorce between criticism and creative writing. There is also a sense of dismay in some quarters that criticism can no longer be seen as upholding a coherent set of values and standards by which both literature and life might be judged; this is seen as a betrayal of the English critical 'line' as represented by the work of Arnold, Eliot, and Leavis. In a 1964 article, David Lodge notes the dissatisfaction at what he calls 'this phenomenon' but adds:

Whether we deplore the situation or not, however, we are faced with it; there are social, political and cultural pressures that we cannot escape. We might as well accept them, as we accept the inevitable; but accepting them entails recognizing that literary criticism is now an independent intellectual discipline and humane pursuit, and no longer the hand-servant of creative writing.<sup>83</sup>

This seems a sensible conclusion so far as it goes but what of the direction of criticism in the future? Lodge suggests that the process of re-examination and refinement required for criticism to 'put its house in order' will entail 'above all a

capacity for keen theoretical thinking about literature and criticism' and goes on to add, quite correctly:

Literary theory has never been congenial to the English mind.....There is a depressing provinciality and 'smallness' about the perspective of English criticism today.<sup>84</sup>

When one recollects the quibbling over detail involved in critical discussion of the setting and dates of The Mayor of Casterbridge, and some of the personal animosity obvious in the critical rejection of the work of critics such as Brown and Kettle on Hardy, this comment of Lodge's seems appropriate.

What I have broadly termed 'the sociological approach' to Hardy's fiction in fact exemplifies a further cause of the dissatisfaction of critics with the state of criticism. Bradbury and Wellek, as we noted, bemoaned the growing tendency for literary criticism to draw its standards of judgement from other disciplines; these range as widely as history, psychology, philosophy and linguistics but in criticism of Hardy it is the application of standards derived from politics and social history which go to make up 'the sociological approach'. Critics who adhere most firmly to such a reading of Hardy's novels are left-wing if not Marxist in political persuasion and view the novels as documents illustrating the destruction of an organic and communal way of life by a capitalist economy based upon class, competition, and inequality. At its worst, as we have seen, this can lead to all kinds of distortions and there is a general reaction from critics and readers against such readings because they are not true to the experience or 'feel' of the novels. Firstly the framework is too deterministic and

allows no possibility of individual or even social choices which, in turn, must lessen the dramatic tension of the novels; and, secondly, because they are written from a single, somewhat narrow historical perspective such approaches can be very rigid and prone to exclude all materials which conflict with this. Thus, in Arnold Kettle's reading of Tess, (see Chapter Four) he argues away the philosophical and fatalistic aspect of the novel, as well as its concentration on a single individual and asserts that the novel is about the destruction of the English peasantry. Such rigidity of approach, which often arises when a theory is systematically taken and applied to a literary text, is not beneficial to criticism. Thus it is helpful when, in this period, Raymond Williams is able to argue for the destruction of the peasantry as a major concern of Hardy's but to qualify the view that it was destroyed by industrial capitalism and the urban invasion by attributing a measure of responsibility to the individuals and the society being attacked. The point most tellingly illustrated by the application of a doctrinaire and dogmatic theory to Hardy's novels, is that there is no future for this kind of criticism. However methodically the theory is applied, however logically the case is argued, if it does not approximate to a sensitive and considered reading of the text then no-one is going to be convinced.

The same kind of over-working of theory drawn from other disciplines is apparent in the assessment of Hardy's characters according to standards derived from the field of psychological investigation. There are many essays in this period which are based upon the assumption that the artistic merits of a character's presentation are dependent upon his or her complexity and the

extent to which he or she offers material for the psychoanalytic approach. This, I think, accounts for the number of studies of Michael Henchard and of Sue Bridehead and Eustacia Vye in this and later periods;<sup>85</sup> all these characters could be said to be psychologically complex or abnormal in some way. Yet, the discovery of psychological complexity in Hardy's characters (as in Dickens's) is not new and dates from the 1940's.<sup>86</sup> What we see in this period, as in the criticism of Carpenter, Karl, and Howe, is a more detailed re-working of what are by now rather stale ideas.

A further characteristic of Hardy criticism in this period, and again one which reflects the general direction of criticism, is the insistence on a 'poetics' of fiction, on structural unity, and a kind of overall coherence that novels like Hardy's often lack. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the stylistic criticism of Lodge and Heilman where both, while making some most illuminating comments on the nature of Hardy's language and style, are unable to classify him or accommodate his variety of styles, the so-called 'unevenness', to their own notions of what constitutes 'great' writing. Thus, because they want Hardy's style to be 'all of a piece' (to quote Heilman) and expect it to be, they can only conclude that Hardy's work leaves us as Lodge puts it with a 'sense of greatness not quite achieved'.<sup>87</sup>

The tendency to regard the action and characters of the novels as symbolic or mythical can also lead to distortion because critics adopting this kind of approach often forget what Gregor points so often to in his criticism - the importance of story. A novel is read as if it were an object rather than a process. He argues



that 'analysis' has taken too much of a hold on criticism and that in the effort to become more methodical in the study of texts, critics have forgotten that a novel is 'story' or 'process' and that their methods do not account for it. He puts it this way:

Most novel readers warm to Wilde's observation, 'This suspense is terrible I hope it will last' - however oblique, subtle and elegant its communication may be. What I am arguing for is not that the critic should devote more of his time to relating the story, but rather to underline the fact that novel reading is a response to a process, a process which has critical implications insufficiently grasped by those intent on conveying the significance of the completed work.<sup>88</sup>

This is particularly important in relation to Hardy's fiction because of the very great emphasis he placed upon suspense and upon story; it can hardly be coincidental that Gregor has focussed much of his critical attention upon Hardy's novels in his attempt to reorientate criticism towards the role of story in the overall picture.

As I think I have indicated a drawback of criticism in the 1960's is that it does not generally proceed from the particular to the general but vice versa. The critical apparatus seems to be becoming so vast and sophisticated that it is in danger of leaving the novels themselves behind altogether. As David Lodge remarks 'good critical practice depends above all on close and sensitive reading';<sup>89</sup> this is what we have in Tony Tanner's criticism of Tess,

otherwise it seems to be in short supply in this period. In the seventies and eighties, as I shall show, there is a move away from the inflexibilities revealed in much of the criticism of this period and there are also some helpful new perspectives on the nature of Hardy's art. Earlier in this chapter I quoted David Lodge's comment that attention to literary theory would help criticism to 'put its house in order' and that the English mind was resistant to theory. That was in 1964; in 1967 he partially recants his view, saying that a work like Frye's Anatomy of Criticism which represents 'the speculative, abstracting, systematising literary mind at its most dazzling' does not, however, fulfil the needs of criticism. Of such criticism he remarks:

.....we cannot afford to be blinded by it: it needs to be filtered through the screen of a more sober and commonsense notion of criticism.....<sup>90</sup>.

This caution serves equally well as a general summary for this period and an introduction to the next.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### CRITICISM SINCE 1970

In the last chapter, dealing with criticism in the 1960's it was seen that there were few new perceptions about Hardy's artistic vision and method. Most such criticism was based upon notions of Hardy as an anti-realist making use of the macabre and grotesque as a way of saying something about the 'nightmare' of modern existence. Hardy was also, as in the forties and fifties, seen as a writer torn by discord. Heilman saw his art and thought as pulling in different directions, Lodge saw conflict and tension between the author and his characters; both find the discordance reflected in Hardy's style and language. Their critical expectations of harmony and symmetry in style put them in the difficult position of admiring Hardy's artistic virtuosity while being intensely critical of the unevenness and inconsistencies in his writing. As I suggested, this may mean that their criteria for judging his novels were inadequate. Other critics see Hardy variously as an artist torn between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - with all that implies - as torn between different classes or cultures, and his work as placed in method between Victorian realism and modernist techniques.

Whether seen in terms of contrasts, paradoxes or similarity and repetition, most criticism in the sixties attempted to point to a particular ruling theme, idea or pattern of some sort which could be said to provide the key to the Hardy world, and thus justify the critic's reading as the correct one.

In the seventies and early eighties there is a gradual movement away from critical insistence upon the single correct reading and much more consideration of the text as yielding a number of meanings which may co-exist. For some critics in this period what a text means is less important than how it comes to be as it is, the way in which the artist has constructed his artefact. Novels are seen less as fixed structures or aesthetic objects and more as processes; they are constantly changing and moving and cannot be pinned down to one meaning for all time.

The sociological approach to Hardy's novels, first seen in Brown's and Kettle's criticism in the fifties and taken up by Williams in the sixties, was widely debated and opposed by many critics because of its being untrue to the experience of reading a Hardy novel. The main objection, voiced by critics such as Maxwell, Gregor and Morrell, was that seeing the novels as concerned primarily with the fate of societies did not do justice to Hardy's very obvious concern with individual characters. In the 1970's the value of the sociological approach is more readily realised because the controversy over its falsifying the experience of reading the novels has died down. Critics seem to have assimilated what is most positive about it, that is, its insistence on Hardy as a writer concerned with his times and with his society. This has acted as a corrective to the tendency to view his novels as timeless pastorals or more recently, as realistic narratives with a substructure of myth or symbol which conveys an eternal message about the human condition.

Critics in the sixties were much concerned with the need to make their profession more scientific (in the broadest sense of the word)

and to make the task of criticism into a discipline; this perhaps largely accounts for the dismissal of elements of the novel such as story and for the need to see character and plot as part of some wider design or structure to the text. In the attempt to prove itself to be a rigorous discipline, criticism was also seen in the sixties to be drawing more and more upon other disciplines for its standards of judgement and methods of analysis; these included sociology, history, psychology, linguistics and philosophy. In the 1970's this borrowing continues and developments in linguistics and philosophy in particular can be seen to influence literary theory and - to some extent - practice too. At the close of the last chapter I quoted David Lodge's comment upon that most influential text, Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (1957), in which he stated that we should not be dazzled by Frye's abstract speculation and that such criticism needed to be 'filtered through the screen of a more sober and commonsense notion of criticism'.<sup>1</sup>

The direction of criticism in at least the early and mid-seventies is towards ever more elaborate systematising, of which Frye's work is an early example. A first section of this chapter is devoted to the nature of the new critical theories, by which I mean particularly structuralism and poststructuralism. From there I will move on to discuss the direct impact of these theories upon criticism of Hardy's novels. A third section will deal more generally with criticism of the art of the novels in this period and will look closely at the way that the pictorial element in Hardy's work has been taken up by critics. There will also be discussion of new attitudes to Hardy's ideas and how they are incorporated into the fictional structure; this will centre upon recent work on the impact of Darwinism on his novels. Finally, a study of criticism of this period would not be complete without

some reference to the Feminist approach to literature.

(I) The New Critical Theories

In several accounts of the rise of structuralism Northrop Frye's work is given a key position. According to Eagleton, in his Literary Theory. An Introduction,<sup>2</sup> Frye can loosely be termed a structuralist in that he saw criticism as being in a 'sorry unscientific mess' and felt it needed the discipline of an objective system:

This was possible, Frye held, because literature itself formed such a system. It was not in fact just a random collection of writings strewn throughout history: if you examined it closely you would see that it worked by certain objective laws, and criticism could itself become systematic by formulating them. These laws were the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured.<sup>3</sup>

As a Marxist, Eagleton naturally does not adhere to what he terms the 'transhistorical' nature of such a mythical structure but, in spite of a declared political bias, he does go on to outline clearly the difference between treating literature as structure (in the manner of Frye) and structuralism proper:

You can examine a poem as a 'structure' while still treating each of its items as more or less meaningful in itself..... But you become a card-carrying structuralist only when you claim that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its relation to the other. The images do not have a 'substantial' meaning, only a 'relational' one.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, as Eagleton's comment suggests, structuralism moves even further towards the study of form in and for itself and quite irrespective of historical context, authorial intention, and questions of evaluation - not to mention the content of the work in hand.

Frye's Anatomy of Criticism was written in 1957 and one might expect there to have been some direct evidence of its influence in sixties criticism of Hardy's novels. Yet, although there is evidence of attention to the mythic and symbolic qualities of the novels, this evidence is no more pervasive than it is in the 1950's in the criticism of Dorothy Van Ghent for example.<sup>5</sup> In much the same way, in the seventies, it is not always easy to pin down the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist theories upon the practice of criticism. As with mythical and symbolic criticism, the influence is undoubtedly present, but not every critic refers directly to theory. There is a particular problem with structuralism too, in that although it is based upon fundamentally different principles from the older New Critical approach, in practice, unless the critic specifically states an allegiance to structuralist theory, it is often difficult to discern the difference between the new and the old. Both approaches treat the text as a closed system and look for design and pattern beneath the surface; the main difference is one not immediately obvious - where a New Critic treats the structure as having meaning and value in relation to reality, a structuralist, as Eagleton says, treats it as having meaning only in relation to other structures or in relation to the various units of its own structure. Where critics in the sixties spoke of the divorce between criticism and creative writing and between criticism and

a central set of values common to literature and life, in this period there is a growing gap between the practice of criticism and critical theories. This distance between the two is seen as inevitable by Ann Jefferson and David Robey:

Although certain types of critical practice can be derived from theory, theory cannot determine the precise form and detail of that practice, and the same applies the other way round. Theory may have implications for practice and practice may help to make sense of theory; but because of the inevitable limitations of abstract language, the two tend necessarily to remain different activities. The machinery of theory cannot be wheeled on as a substitute for criticism, which alone is capable of picking up the nuances and the particular idiom of the work of a given writer.<sup>6</sup>

This seems confusing. It is a commonplace of criticism today that there is no such thing as a neutral, unbiased, value-free reading of a text. Thus every critic must have something approximating to a theory of literature before he or she begins the practice of criticism. The relationship between the theory and the practice should, as Jefferson and Robey suggest, be two-way, the one modifying the other. The contention that the two tend to be different activities because of the 'limitations of abstract language' sounds rather like an excuse, for the abstractions should surely derive partially from the experience of 'picking up the nuances and the particular idiom of the work of a given writer'. Their comments betray what seems to be one of the great weaknesses of recent critical theory - its lack of reference to the practice of criticism.

David Lodge's view of the matter is that theory has not only become divorced from the practice of academic criticism but that it is



also now alienated from reviewing and literary journalism, and from teaching in academic institutions:

.....there is an increasing gap between teaching and research, the same individual giving bland, old-fashioned tutorials on Middlemarch in the morning, and in the afternoon reducing it to something resembling algebra, or a treatise on phenomenology badly translated from the French, for the edification of a small peer group.<sup>7</sup>

Lodge's summary of the situation is this:

Literary criticism is at present in a state of crisis which is partly a consequence of its own success. One might compare its situation to that of physics after Einstein and Heisenberg: the discipline has made huge intellectual advances, but in the process has become incomprehensible to the layman - and indeed to many professionals educated in an older, more humane tradition. This incomprehensibility is not simply a matter of jargon - though that is a real stumbling block; more fundamentally, the new criticism, like the new physics, often runs counter to empirical observation and common-sense. It therefore tends to alienate and exclude the common reader.<sup>8</sup>

This summary forms part of the preface to Lodge's book, Working with Structuralism, which as he points out, refers not only to the attempt to apply structuralist techniques to critical practice, but also to the necessity of accepting and coming to terms with the new theories in a more general sort of way.

The assimilation of structuralist and poststructuralist theories into one's ideas and practice does, as Lodge says, involve confronting the jargon; this can be extremely time-consuming and

one wonders at the end of it whether it was really worth the effort. He puts it this way:

To open a book or article by, for instance, Derrida or one of his disciples is to feel that the mystification and intimidation of the reader is the ultimate aim of the enterprise.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, although sceptical about the new critical theories, much of Lodge's recent work represents an attempt to accommodate them to what he terms 'empirical observation and common sense'. His work on Hardy, particularly, has been valuable and has benefited from his interest in structuralism; in fact three of the five sections in Working with Structuralism are on Hardy's novels and will be looked at in some detail later in this chapter.

Other critics in this period make it clear that they do not believe it is possible to reconcile the old humanist tradition with the new theory. The term 'common sense' means something quite different to Eagleton from that which it means to Lodge:

The fact that structuralism offends common sense has always been a point in its favour. Common sense holds that things generally have only one meaning and that this meaning is usually obvious.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Eagleton allies 'common sense' with a kind of prejudice and narrow-mindedness which he would associate with the worst of non-Marxist critical attitudes. In his reading common sense is the enemy of progressive radicalism. What he claims for it is clearly untrue of Lodge who uses the phrase to suggest the drawbacks of too much abstract speculation without reference to the practice of criticism or the experience of the author and/or

reader.

Raman Selden too, in his assessment of critical developments since about 1970, refers to it in these terms. He says that until recently,

.....criticism spoke about literature without disturbing our picture of the world or of ourselves as readers. Then, at the end of the 1960's, things began to change.

During the past fifteen years or so students of literature have been troubled by a seemingly endless series of challenges to the consensus of common sense.<sup>11</sup>

Here again we see common sense being associated with an earlier critical tradition of consensus which, it is implied, is based upon a firm sense of reality and a scale of value judgements which have now been called into question. It is not really very accurate to refer to past critical assumptions as being based upon a consensus view. As this study has shown, there has been a marked plurality of attitudes and, in addition, it is not true to say that until the late 1960's, 'criticism spoke about literature without disturbing our picture of the world or of ourselves as readers'. Far more fundamental and wide-reaching changes in the perception of literature and its relation to reality took place in the 1940's (as was shown in Chapter Three of this study) when critics became aware that in the work of Hardy, as in that of Dickens, failure to adhere to what we might call surface realism did not mean that their art was in any way inferior. In fact the reputations of both novelists rose in this period because it was realised that their defiance of logic and probability in events and their often larger than life, supposedly 'flat' characters

arose from their perceptions about a deeper level of consciousness and a disturbing reality beneath the surface of life. It was at this time that Hardy began to be seen as a writer prefiguring modernist techniques in literature and as one with a sense of the modern predicament of isolation and alienation.

Some of the objections of critics (particularly British critics) to the domination of systems and structures over the sensitive reading of individual texts, which we can see both here and in the last chapter, are at least partially answered in the theories which constitute poststructuralism. Contributions to post-structural theory are many and varied but, in its main manifestation of deconstructionism, it does go some way towards lessening critical emphasis upon unity and coherence in texts. This has, I think, been beneficial to novel criticism in general and in particular (where influence can be traced) to criticism of Hardy's fiction which - as we have seen - has proved very resistant to attempts to impose structural coherence upon it, and has attracted much critical comment about its incongruity, awkwardness and inconsistency. Once again Terry Eagleton's explanations are instructive and lucid; like Raymond Williams he often writes best when he forgets his own thesis. For instance, he describes the movement from structuralism to poststructuralism thus:

It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Eagleton frequently uses the analogy of 'nailing' things down in

Literary Theory. An Introduction. This, of course, reminds one of Lawrence, whose insistence upon the impossibility of nailing the novel down has been a recurring theme in this study. The most positive aspect of poststructuralist theory for novel criticism is precisely that it allows for fluidity, process and plurality in interpretation of texts.

A further image used by Eagleton and one which comes to inform several studies of Hardy in this period is that of the web. In Chapter One (see pp 73-75) its use by George Eliot and Hardy in relation to the evolutionary process was briefly discussed. In the 1970's it serves a double function; it is used by critics to express Hardy's sense of the tangled web of human affairs (particularly in relation to Darwin's influence on his work) and is also employed as a method of describing - in poststructuralist terms - the form of his novels.

Here we see Eagleton adopting the image as a way of explaining deconstruction. He remarks that in deconstruction language is a much less stable affair than the classical structuralist had considered:

Instead of being a well-defined, clearly demarcated structure containing symmetrical units of signifiers and signifieds, it now begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else.<sup>13</sup>

A rather similar definition of deconstruction is given by Dale Kramer when he takes up the Jamesian image of the figure in the

carpet; the connection between his description and Eagleton's lies, we observe, in the idea of the text as 'woven':

If the purpose of Anglo-American formalism is to decipher the figure in the carpet, that of recent Continental inspired ways of reading is to study the nature of the fibre in the threads and of the spaces between them, and one of its recurring queries is whether the carpet has a figure that one can finally locate.<sup>14</sup>

(II) Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Hardy Criticism

One of the earliest works of this period is also one which shows most markedly the influence of both Continental and American critical theories. J. Hillis-Miller's Distance and Desire (1970) is an example of what is known as phenomenological criticism. Miller has, it seems, run the gamut of structuralism and post-structuralism at various stages in his career, so it is difficult to label him one thing or another.<sup>15</sup> However, in practice, his interest in patterns of repetition in literature and particularly in Hardy's work, seems to extend throughout this period. His recent work, Fiction and Repetition (1982) is clearly related in ideas and method to the earlier book on Hardy and two of its seven chapters are on his novels.

For a useful definition of phenomenology and phenomenological criticism, I refer once again to Eagleton who, although he disapproves of its anti-historical, universalist, essentialist stance, nevertheless provides a clear statement of its nature. Phenomenology appears to be broadly structuralist;

To grasp any phenomenon wholly and purely is to grasp what is essentially unchanging about it.<sup>16</sup>

and in phenomenological criticism,

The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author's consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author's mind.....Phenomenological criticism will typically focus upon the way an author experiences time or space, on the relation between self and others, or his perception of material objects.<sup>17</sup>.

Eagleton's description of the foci of this kind of criticism is particularly applicable to Miller's work which described Hardy's art almost entirely in terms of his consciousness and the distances or spaces between narrator, characters, reader and events. Hardy's attitude to and treatment of time too is central to Miller's interpretation. There are two important presuppositions which, for him, underlie Hardy's work. Firstly, time is an illusion: Hardy's greatest moments of vision are 'transtemporal' - past and present, proximity and distance are all one:

For him everything already exists before it happens and goes on existing after it has happened in history.<sup>18</sup>.

Secondly, and related to the first point, Miller claims that we find in Hardy's work that any single event is a repetition of similar events which have already occurred over and over in history and will occur innumerable times again. Miller's title for his book, Distance and Desire, is explained thus:

Two themes are woven throughout the totality of Hardy's work and may be followed from one edge of it to the other as outlining threads: distance

and desire - distance as the source of desire and desire as the energy behind the attempt to turn distance into closeness.<sup>19</sup>.

This distance is not just that which exists between the lover and his beloved within a Hardy novel nor is it only to be seen in terms of the time and space within the story, but extends to the distance between the narrator's retrospective view and the time of the characters as they live from moment to moment moving towards the future. Such a distance also exists between the perspectives of the reader and the narrator as well as between the narrator and his characters. In this way, reader, narrator and characters are all bound together in the creation of the text; through his writing Hardy brings 'into presence and into the present that which always seems at a distance'. Writing is an activity in the real world but the fictional world created also has its own structures which though they are close to reality are transposed into another form of reality which can then reflect back upon what we think is the real world:

The text interprets and clarifies its sources as much as the sources clarify and interpret the text. Each sustains and generates the meaning of the other. Each is both real and unreal. <sup>20</sup>.

While this is not quite structuralist since Miller does not claim that the structure of the text alone forms reality, the idea of art determining life or reality as well as vice-versa is close to the structuralist idea of language and text, as defined by Selden:

Instead of saying that an author's language reflects reality, the structuralists argue



that the structure of language produces  
'reality'.<sup>21</sup>.

So far as Miller is concerned, Hardy presents a view of life in which direct involvement (when distances are done away with and desire is fulfilled) brings disillusionment. Distance creates desire and his novels are designed so that we may see them structured around what he terms 'the dance of desire', that is patterns of distance and proximity. Thus, having experienced disillusionment through over-involvement, Miller maintains that Hardy's main characters return to a state of distance and detachment and become spectators on life - like the narrator and the reader:

The structure of Hardy's works of fiction may therefore be defined as an ultimate convergence of the protagonists' point of view with the narrator's point of view.<sup>22</sup>.

Even this, however, is not the final movement since, having converged, the protagonist and narrator then diverge again. The pattern is never completed but constantly shifts; although Miller does not say so, one imagines it to be rather like a kaleidoscope:

To perform an act, feel an emotion, or glimpse a landscape is only to bring into temporal existence something which has always already been fated and which will continue to exist forever in eternity..... Things are conjured up and then pass magically into eternity again.<sup>23</sup>.

The point of this, as Miller sees it, is that history has no meaning, nor has individual mind or will; everything is always

there, held in a big container and things just come and go. No-one ever dies because consciousness continues so it is actually impossible to die.

Although one's first instinct on reading Miller's work is to feel that it says more about Miller's philosophic standpoint than Hardy's 'work' (he does not distinguish between poems, novels and stories), when one has considered the matter further, there does seem to be at least some value in this perspective. The critic is reduced to a rather passive role, 'a watcher watching the watcher watch his characters', as Miller puts it, but he is at least not obliged to prove that his is the 'correct' reading or that there is unity and completeness about the work:

Dwelling within the works and outside them at once, he (i.e. the critic) attempts to trace out the implicit patterns which give them form. Balancing distance against intimacy he tries to reveal the congruence of the various courses of desire woven through the web of life by Hardy's people.<sup>24</sup>

Here we see Miller using the increasingly familiar web image to describe the pattern of Hardy's novels and the critic is seen as following the threads, tracing the pattern, which is also the pattern of the author's consciousness.

Miller's critical position lies, it seems to me, somewhere between structuralism and poststructuralism. He finds design, even what we might call 'structure' in Hardy's work but the design is one which includes movement and change and which is peculiar to Hardy and not a design common to all texts of the same class. However, independently of Miller's place in the theoretical field,

his work is of some value to Hardy criticism because it opens up new possibilities for understanding his art. By immersing himself in Hardy's consciousness and trying to capture something of the atmosphere of the Hardy world, Miller's criticism helps us to approach an understanding of the way in which Hardy may have worked. It achieves in some measure what critics like Gregor and Maxwell were asking for in Hardy criticism in the sixties - that is, it attempts to tell the reader what it 'feels like' to read a Hardy novel. It is a reading which proceeds from a particular literary and philosophical position, just as much as any of those rather inflexible readings (e.g. the sociological ones by Kettle and Brown) which Gregor and Maxwell objected to. The difference is that Miller is prepared to consider (if not trust) the teller as well as the tale and his theoretical position allows for literature, particularly fiction, as a process which alters as one reads and according to who reads it. Even if one does not accept Miller's formulation of the shifting patterns being ones of distance and desire, the basic approach, with its tone of tentative suggestion and exploration, is a welcome change from the authoritative definiteness which has characterised much post-war criticism.

By 1982, in Fiction and Repetition, which pays much attention to Hardy's novels, Miller can more clearly be seen to be a believer in deconstruction - though he stresses his allegiance to it as practice rather than theory. His main contention in this work is that there are two kinds of repetition, that based upon similarity which is 'grounded' and that based upon unlikeness or difference which is 'ungrounded'. In the novels which he investigates here by Conrad, Emily Bronte, Thackeray, Hardy and Woolf, Miller maintains both sorts of repetition are present, although they

appear to be incompatible and contradictory. He explains his position like this:

The relationship between the two forms of repetition defies the elementary principle of logic, the law of non-contradiction which says: "Either A or not-A". In all the novels read here both forms of repetition are in one way or another affirmed as true, though they appear logically to contradict each other..... The hypothesis of such a heterogeneity in literary and philosophical texts is a working principle of that form of criticism called "deconstruction"..... The very word 'deconstruction' is meant to undermine the either/or logic of the opposition 'construction/destruction'.<sup>25</sup>

As well as referring to the two forms of repetition as 'grounded' (similarity) and 'ungrounded' (difference), Miller talks of 'overthought' and 'underthought'. He believes that the interplay in texts between the two kinds of repetition accounts, as it were, for their unaccountability, their stubborn resistance to attempts to impose conceptions of "organic unity" on them. Such attempts, says Miller, 'may become a temptation to leave out what does not fit, to see it as insignificant or as a flaw'. This is important because, as we have seen during the course of this examination of Hardy criticism, its development up to about 1970 was virtually all in the direction of searching for ever more unity and coherence in novels which are ultra-resistant to such findings. Hence the claims for Hardy's greatness but the difficulty of proving it by close analysis. Miller's lucidity in explaining his deconstructionist position and his sensible attitude to theory are really exemplary; he never loses sight of the connection between theory and practice:

In recent controversies about criticism there has been, it seems to me, too much attention paid to this theory or that, to its terminology, and to its presumed or "theoretical" consequences, and not enough to the readings made possible by the theories in question. A theory is all too easy to refute or deny, but a reading can be controverted only by going through the difficult task of rereading the work in question and proposing an alternative reading.<sup>26</sup>

He concludes his introductory chapter with a typically deconstructionist open-endedness:

If this book sends readers back to the seven novels with minds more open to their complexities of repetitive form, more prepared to be startled by what they find there, even startled by aspects my accounts have left out or unwittingly distorted, the chapters will have done all that I could hope for them.<sup>27</sup>

Miller's first chapter is only briefly summarised here; the explanation he gives of the two forms of fictional repetition is actually based upon some quite abstract philosophical and psychological conceptions about similarity and difference. It is not, however, my business to discuss these fully here but to attend to the way Miller's deconstructionism affects his own and other critics' attitudes to Hardy's art. His work is important, as I have stated, because it opens up new possibilities for Hardy criticism which to some degree form the basis of much of the best work during the last fifteen years. Miller is not, after all, the only critic to apply the new theories to criticism of Hardy's novels although he is one of the earliest and he pursues his task with rigour and method. There are advantages and disadvantages to this thoroughness; on the one hand we can see very clearly where Miller's theoretical allegiance lies and he

uses the vocabulary of the new theories articulately; on the other hand, like many of his poststructuralist colleagues in American universities, he is so bound up with the nuances of developments in critical theory that he draws the reader into a world of highly abstract debate which even a sophisticated reader can find alien, and perhaps only marginally relevant to both the reading of the text and practice of literary criticism. Frank Lentricchia has commented that,

American poststructuralist literary criticism tends to be an activity of textual privatisation, the critic's doomed attempt to retreat from a social landscape of fragmentation and alienation. Criticism becomes, in this perspective, something like an ultimate mode of interior decoration whose chief value lies in its power to trigger our pleasures and whose chief measure of success lies in its capacity to keep pleasure going in a potentially infinite variety of ways.<sup>28</sup>

It would be quite unfair to call Miller's criticism of Hardy 'an ultimate mode of interior decoration' but the kind of immersion in the text which he advocates can sometimes blur perspective and certainly will have little to do with evaluation of the text. Miller sees his task in Fiction and Repetition in terms of the image of threads and weaving; his comment here also underscores the non-evaluative aspect of poststructuralist criticism:

The focus of my readings is on the "how" of meaning rather than on its "what", not "what is the meaning?" but "how does meaning arise from the reader's encounter with just these words on the page?" I try to attend to the threads of the tapestry of words in each case rather than simply to the picture the novel makes when viewed from a distance.<sup>29</sup>

In his reading of Tess in Fiction and Repetition Miller 'attends to the threads of the tapestry of words' by examining Tess' seduction or rape (we cannot tell, says Miller, which it is); this is never actually described directly in the novel but is referred to by Hardy as the marking out of a pattern on Tess' flesh. This metaphor is part of a series in the novel, 'that includes the tracing of a pattern, the making of a mark, the carving of a line or sign, and the act of writing.' We can see the connection here between Miller's earlier work in Distance and Desire and the deconstructionism of Fiction and Repetition - the process of writing the novel and the events of the novel in their various patterns are the product of one consciousness:

The metaphor of the tracing of a pattern has a multiple significance. It assimilates the real event to the act of writing about it. It defines both the novel and the events it presents as repetitions, as the outlining again of a pattern which already somewhere exists.<sup>30</sup>

Miller also writes of the repetition of the colour red in the novel, in much the same way that Tony Tanner did in the sixties,<sup>31</sup> but he sees it as part of a larger framework rather than as an isolated use of a pattern of imagery:

Taken together, the elements form a system of mutually defining motifs, each of which exists as its relation to the others. The reader must execute a lateral dance of interpretation to explicate any given passage, without ever reading, in his sideways movement, a passage which is chief, original, or originating, a sovereign principle of explanation.<sup>32</sup>

Also like Tanner, Miller rejects the idea of a single explanation

for Tess's tragedy. He outlines the various different interpretations - Tess as victim of social changes, of her own personality, of her inherited nature, of fate, or Hardy's own machinations as an author - and comments:

The novel provides evidence to support any or all of these interpretations. Tess of the d'Urbervilles, like Hardy's work in general, is overdetermined. The reader is faced with an embarrassment of riches. The problem is not that there are no explanations proposed in the text, but that there are too many..... It would seem that they cannot all be correct. My following through of some threads in the intricate web of Hardy's text has converged toward the conclusion that it is wrong in principle to assume that there must be some single accounting cause. For Hardy, the design has no source. It happens.<sup>33</sup>

This recalls particularly Tanner's remark that, 'more than make us judge, Hardy makes us see', and the way that we are enabled to see what Hardy sees by the critic is, in Miller's view, by following 'threads in the intricate web of Hardy's text'.

This movement of the critical focus away from evaluation, from the single correct interpretation, to the more relative exploration of the 'web' of the text is the most major shift in criticism of Hardy's fiction since 1940 when the centennial issue of Southern Review marked the beginning of critical writing on Hardy as an artist probing psychological states and as one peculiarly aware of the modern condition. At this time, much of what had seemed to be bad writing and poor artistry on Hardy's part was, as I indicated on page 166, increasingly seen as part of a conscious artistic method which had previously not been understood. In both cases the critical shift is a reflection of a



wider change in the way that the relationship between art and reality is perceived. In the 1940's it was largely the result of the application of psychological techniques to literature; in the 1970's the changes in the critical perspective derive from theories of language as applied to the literary text. The dangers of the kind of deconstructionist approach practised by Miller are that by withdrawing from any kind of evaluation and in denying the relevance of historical context and authorial intention the text could just be rendered altogether irrelevant and without meaning or significance in a wider context. We should remember Lentricchia's description of extreme versions of poststructuralism as 'an ultimate mode of interior decoration'.<sup>34</sup> It is also worthwhile noting Lentricchia's assessment of the traditionalist response to poststructuralist activity in the early seventies as one which charges it with 'unbridled subjectivism, relativism, irrationalism, and structural self-contradiction'. Such a response, while understandable, does not do justice to poststructuralism; it is still probably too early to assess its value for literary criticism as a whole but so far as criticism of the novel goes, it may be seen to be a qualified success.

Miller's criticism of Hardy exemplifies the main critical developments of the period since 1970. It cannot really be described as typical because it is more articulate and erudite than some of the other work which takes on board the same ideas. David Lodge's essays on Hardy in Working with Structuralism are perhaps less erudite but are more accessible to the general reader. Lodge's comments upon structuralism in general have already been noted (see pp 316-318). As we saw, he had reservations about its value for the practice of criticism, but he also claims that,

My increasing interest in Hardy, evidenced by the three essays on his work, itself no doubt reflects the influence of structuralist criticism.....<sup>35</sup>.

and he goes on to say that in Hardy's 'elaborate and ingenious - and sometimes tortuous - patterning of his novels' we see the classic realist novel taken to the very limits of what it could tolerate, 'without collapsing and reforming into the modernist novel'.<sup>36</sup> However, as Robey points out, it is not enough for the practising critic merely to pick out the verbal patterns. A linguistic approach has both strengths and limitations; on the one hand,

.....It can point to structural features not evident to the non-linguistic critic, but which the critic must admit may well be an important source of effect. On the other hand the structural analysis of the language only tells part of the story; the question how structural features contribute to the text's overall effect still remains to be answered by the critic.<sup>37</sup>

This then is the task for Lodge as a critic of Hardy, as it was for Miller, not only to pick out the threads but to follow them through the text and to discern the pattern. Lodge's description of how he sees Hardy's development as a novelist suggests that he is equal to the task:

Hardy's development as a novelist - it is what makes him in the last analysis, a modern rather than a Victorian - was directed towards a mode of writing in which every scene, gesture and image would function simultaneously on several different levels: as a vivid and precise imitation of actuality, as a link in a chain of causation, as symbolic action and as part of a formal pattern of parallels, contrasts and correspondences.<sup>38</sup>

The way in which Lodge sees Hardy's patterning as contributing to 'the text's overall effect' is well illustrated by his essay on Jude the Obscure, 'Pessimism and Fictional Form';<sup>39</sup>. this essay also shows his closeness to Miller's critical stance, in spite of Lodge being more of a structuralist than a post-structuralist. According to Lodge there is no suggestion in Jude that the protagonists could ever have achieved happy and fulfilled lives - the very form of the novel, 'works to articulate and reinforce the pessimism of its vision of life'. Life in Jude is portrayed as 'a closed system of disappointment', for the reader as much as for Jude and Sue. The way in which we become aware of the form of the novel is described by Lodge in much the same way that Miller describes it:

.....We become conscious of form, as readers, through the perception of recurrence and repetition (and the negative kind of repetition which is contrast) in the stream of apparently random or 'given' particularly that, in the realistic novel tradition to which Hardy belonged, creates the illusion of life.<sup>40</sup>

Thus in Jude the repetition and contrast in the relationships between couples, the repeated episodes of 'obstructed relationship', the repeated disillusionments, all form a closed structure which in itself prevents escape; medium and message are one.

In The Woodlanders,<sup>41</sup>. on the other hand, Lodge finds it more difficult to interpret what Hardy is trying to tell us and comments:

As is usually the case with Hardy, there is a bewildering plurality of possible answers. They are not necessarily

mutually exclusive, but we can discount some, and relegate others to a minor position.<sup>42</sup>

So Lodge is saying that at some point the critic must stop 'following the threads' or even discerning the pattern and comment on its meaning and significance. This is rather different from Miller's approach which is strictly non-evaluative. So far as his own reading of The Woodlanders is concerned Lodge appears to select what is and is not important in a rather arbitrary fashion. He says, for instance, that,

.....although Grace's false hopes of getting a divorce contribute significantly to the emotional drama of herself, Giles and her father, it would be absurd to regard the book as in any important sense a protest against the contemporary law governing marriage. Hardy makes quite clear in the Preface that this law, and the observance of it, though open to question outside the novel, are taken for granted within it.<sup>43</sup>

As we know, the novel was often regarded by Hardy's contemporaries as a protest against the marriage laws and Hardy was himself bitter about marriage; everything depends upon what Lodge means by 'in any important sense' and upon his taking Hardy's stated intention in the Preface at face value. Fundamentally Lodge is probably right to claim such a protest is not of first importance to the integrity or success of the text but to claim that it is 'absurd' is rather overstating the case. Lodge is on safer ground when he deals with the 'workings' of the novel, as it were:

In The Woodlanders the conventions of realism, to which Hardy as a nineteenth-century novelist was committed, replace - or, to use Northrop Frye's word, 'displace' - the conventions of pastoral, so that these appear mainly on the periphery of the work,

or beneath its surface, in allusion, metaphor and suggestion.<sup>44</sup>

This idea of there being a surface realism in Hardy's novels which has beneath it another structure is prevalent in other criticism of this period, so is the associated assumption that the structure beneath is somehow the real or true one - as we shall see.

### (III) Hardy's Artistry - Pictorialism

Virtually all the critics of this period see Hardy as a novelist straining in his art away from Victorian forms of fiction and towards modernist techniques. They see the tensions in his style as reflecting his position between two eras in much the same way that Williams saw those tensions as reflections of Hardy's position between two classes or cultures.<sup>45</sup> Lodge quite clearly sees him as a modern writer (see p.334); Millgate's comment that what we see as faults in Hardy's style may actually be, 'the means available to Hardy in his time and situation, for the realisation of his radically new and individual vision', shows that he also takes this view. Jean Brooks writes 'Thomas Hardy, born in the nineteenth century and dying in the twentieth bridges two worlds'.<sup>46</sup> Ian Gregor, writing of Jude as Hardy's last novel sees it as being,

.....shaped by a conflict between a kind of fiction which he had exhausted and a kind of fiction which instinctively he discerned as meeting his need, but which, imaginatively, he had no access to.<sup>47</sup>

His final assessment is, 'where Jude ends The Rainbow begins.'

Lance St. John Butler expresses much the same point rather more graphically:

Behind him (i.e. Hardy) are the illusory certainties of the old world, before him the wasteland of the new. He belongs to both worlds and to neither.<sup>48</sup>

John Bayley, too, considers that Hardy's novels constitute a break from what he calls the 'instinctive fluency' of the 'big' mid-Victorian novelists.<sup>49</sup>

The tendency to regard Hardy as an innovative novelist, moving towards what later became modernist perceptions and techniques, informs much of the criticism since 1970. We have already seen the critical concern of writers like Lodge and Miller, with a kind of sub-structure to Hardy's novels, a pattern beneath the narrative surface; this also is the concern of Jean Brooks in her Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure (1971). This statement provides a fair summary of her critical perspective on the art of Hardy's fiction:

The narrative provides action in time. The poetic underpattern, with its accumulation of echoes, parallels and contrasts, shows the significance of that action.<sup>50</sup>

The phrase 'poetic underpattern' recurs frequently in Brooks' study and usually refers to an underpattern of myth, ritual, or some other unifying element. At the end of the last section it was noted that Lodge saw the pastoral element in The Woodlanders as existing beneath the realistic surface of the work 'in allusion, metaphor and suggestion'. This is very much how Brooks

views all Hardy's novels. Like many of her contemporaries too, Brooks links the juxtaposition of opposites in the form of Hardy's fiction to the discords and tensions in his view of life. Hardy contrasts the usual with the unusual, the concrete with the abstract, natural with supernatural, light with dark and order with disorder. In her reading of Tess, for instance, Brooks stresses the elemental qualities; she mentions three deaths and rebirths, and (drawing on Tanner) the use of red and white in the novel. Her summary of Tess links the mythical with a modern angst when she calls it, 'This modern myth about the maintenance of human identity against the void'. She uses similar terminology when she describes Jude as 'this epic of modern existentialist man' and shows her broad consonance with current critical theories in her comments on the form of Jude:

The whole novel is shaped by meaningful contrasts and repetitions growing organically from the physical life of the poetically-conceived scenes.<sup>51</sup>

Jean Brooks' study of Hardy is very close and detailed but in spite of its many excellent observations relies too much on received theories. There is so much stress on the 'poetic underpattern' and upon Hardy's use of opposites as the basis of this underpattern that one feels inclined, after reading it to agree with Cedric Watts' comment that, 'in the twentieth century, critics have long overvalued the paradoxical and the self-contradictory.'<sup>52</sup>

The inclination to agree with Watts is reinforced also by reading Penelope Vigar's study of Hardy. She writes of Hardy's incongruity and of the gaps and inconsistencies in his work, and

decides that,

Perhaps the greatest incongruity in Hardy's work is the enormous disparity between his presentation of what he sees as the essential reality of existence and his explanation of the same vision.<sup>53</sup>

Thus Vigar aims to 'explore the complexities of Hardy's impression of life as it is revealed in his novels' in an attempt to ascertain why the gaps and inconsistencies exist and whether they were intentional. In a workmanlike way, Vigar examines Hardy's fiction and concludes that his theme is the contrast between appearance and reality and that the structure of the novels underscores the theme, stressing as it does the macabre and the disproportioning effects of light and dark. Vigar places much importance also upon Hardy's use of pictorialism as an element in the structure of the novels; she sees it as providing an enormous frame for the working of the story. There is nothing very striking or new about Vigar's critical perceptions although they are worth recording because of their typicality. Apart from the sense she conveys of Hardy's art being disproportionate and inconsistent, another typical feature of criticism of this period is present in her highlighting of the pictorial element in the novels. The extent to which Hardy draws upon the effects of light and dark to gain effect in his work and his use of colour and perspective, have long been recognised, but the critical focus upon the importance of the visual arts, cinema included, as well as the other arts is one of the most major developments in this period. Almost all the critics referred to in this chapter mention it and many think it to be something of a key to Hardy's artistic technique and to the impressions we as readers take away from his



work.

Vigar describes Hardy's pictorialism in terms of word painting, 'the words paint some kind of corresponding image in the mind', and describes it as 'a picture of a picture of life.' She stresses, as do other critics, that such word painting is never merely decorative in Hardy but an integral part of his vision. Norman Page goes even further when he claims that pictorialism means more in relation to Hardy than any other English novelist, and he defines it thus:

.....the use of sharply visualised situations verbally rendered, not merely as a means of evoking character or scene, but as a method of telling a story.<sup>54</sup>

Where Vigar saw Hardy as making particular use of impressionist techniques and of the art of black and white photography, thus contrasting romantic blurring of focus with sharply defined realism, Page maintains he takes much from Victorian narrative painting and from the old masters. Hardy's sophisticated use of pictorialism leads Page, like others, to have a new respect for Hardy's artistry:

James's preoccupation with form was certainly more explicit, more sophisticated and more persistent, but Hardy was far from being the naïve teller of artless tales he has sometimes been depicted.<sup>55</sup>

In the sixties Tony Tanner suggested this new critical emphasis on Hardy's pictorialism in his essay, 'Colour and Movement in Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles'.<sup>56</sup> He maintained that the

pictorial element in this novel was what contributed to its 'graphic crudity of effect'. This unsubtle rather wooden and crude effect is also noticed by Millgate but he, like Tanner, sees it as a particular method which works well for Hardy, and not as a fault. Brooks, like Vigar, sees pictorialism as consistuting part of the structure of Hardy's fiction:

As an artist, Hardy knew the value of a 'frame' which concentrates attention on a pictorial or dramatic composition.<sup>57</sup>

However, the conception of Hardy as an artist making particular and peculiar use of the other arts goes further than references to 'framing' and to his use of static images from painting and photography. David Lodge, for instance, develops profitably the notion of Hardy as a cinematic artist.<sup>58</sup> That Hardy's narrative technique with its close-ups and long-shots is like the vision of a bird or a camera is not a new idea, but Lodge takes it further than this. He mentions the smallness and vulnerability of human figures on massive landscapes, as in The Return of The Native, and notes that these and other stunning visual effects are 'part of some larger aesthetic and thematic pattern'. Lodge also draws attention to the way in which, as in films we often, as readers, view illuminated interiors from outside, through a door or a window. Hardy has, says Lodge,

.....the ability to give power and poignancy to commonplace and even stereotyped emotion by artful effects of lighting and perspective.<sup>59</sup>

The most highly developed and certainly the most impressive study

to date of Hardy's relationship to the pictorial and other arts is Joan Grundy's Hardy and the Sister Arts (1979). She claims that the primary motivation for beginning her work on Hardy in 1970 was a desire to answer the two related questions of what makes Hardy good? and what makes Hardy, Hardy?

I was convinced that the answer lay not, as so many critics were telling me at the time, in either his philosophy, his moral standpoint, or his sociology, but rather in his art, which was still relatively ignored, belittled, or denied to exist.<sup>60</sup>

As a general statement this reflects the movement of criticism since 1970 with its greater concentration on Hardy's art as opposed to his ideas (or the critic's). Grundy's particular contribution is in showing how extensively Hardy drew upon the other arts for his methods and effects. Hardy's emphasis on the visual is built in to the structure of his novels, according to Grundy; both narrator and reader (here we remember Miller's very similar point) are put in the position of sympathetic observers watching what the characters watch. Life, for Hardy in his novels, is something of a show and has affinities with pantomimes, magic lantern slides and conjuring shows. Grundy's criticism here seems to continue and develop the critical perspective of J. O. Bailey's Mephistophelian Visitants essay in the 1940's and Emma Clifford's essay on Jude in the fifties.<sup>61</sup>

These two essays, along with Tanner's on Tess in the sixties, can, I think, be said to be early versions of Grundy's more fully developed study in this period.

Grundy notes Hardy's use of the effect of 'chiaroscuro' through

sun, moon, firelight, lamps, candles, lanterns and everglow-worms. She also, like other critics, draws attention to Hardy's word-painting making specific links such as that Tess's arrest may have been influenced by Bellini's 'Agony in The Garden'. That Hardy should make extensive use of pictures in his fiction is appropriate to his period:

The pictures tell stories. The stories are told, to a large extent, in pictures. Both stories and pictures, moreover, share a common ground and common interests, even a common sensibility.<sup>62</sup>.

Grundy suggests a connection between Hardy's word-painting and his ideas when she likens some of the scenes in Tess to those of late Turner. Like Turner, Hardy uses hazy confusions of sky, land and horizon as a means of epitomising his view of man's condition - his confusions and uncertainties.

Moving on to Hardy's use of theatrical effects, Grundy portrays Hardy as a kind of Dickensian showman in his novels. They are, she says, full of melodramatic stereotypes, theatrical plots and sensational incidents which heighten excitement and emotional tension. Thus, although Grundy draws upon the work of earlier critics like Bailey and Clifford for her picture of the Hardy world as disturbing and strange, she goes further than either of these critics by making positive links between Hardy's use of the various effects, visual and theatrical, and the influence upon him of other art forms. Both Bailey and Clifford, among others, tended to attribute the use of such effects to Hardy's idiosyncratic imagination.

Like Lodge, Grundy sees affinity between Hardy's art and that of film, - it is an affinity which in her view derives from his vision of life as spots of light surrounded by darkness, as when one is in an auditorium or watching a small television screen in a darkened room. The technique is, as Lodge also saw, not just a way of presenting events but a way of interpreting them. Life in Hardy's art does seem to be very much a series of bright moments amidst the relentless onward movement of time which keeps on rolling, like the camera when filming. This, I think, is what the analogy with cinematic art adds to the comparisons with the other visual arts and also where it fits in with poststructuralist theories. Where the other visual arts are perceived in terms of rather fixed images or gestures, the cinematic arts may be seen in terms of changes of perspective, movement and alteration of focus. Such an analogy seems an appropriate one in view of Hardy's role as narrator in his novels, mediating between long-shots and close-ups.

Grundy's claim for affinity between Hardy's fictional art and that of music and dance is less persuasive than her claim for affinity with the visual arts, but is nevertheless thought-provoking. She notes the use Hardy makes of the seductive power of music and dance in suggesting the supernatural and interestingly, compares his emotional effects and dramatic impact to those achieved by opera - especially in The Return of the Native. The reference to music explains for Grundy the effects of dissonance so often experienced in Hardy's work:

Hardy responds to experience through its tones, rhythms, and harmonies, its changing tempos, chords and keys.<sup>63</sup>

Like several of her contemporaries, Grundy sees the pattern of Hardy's novels as a web - the spokes are rigid but the tissue moves. She agrees with Gregor, whose criticism she refers to, that Hardy's novels have form but that it is always ongoing. She also refers to Miller's description of the fictional pattern as 'the dance of desire' and comments that the dance creates a sense of formal pattern but that fluid rhythms underlie it.

Joan Grundy's work, then, like that of Miller, Lodge, and other innovative critics since 1970 (Bayley, Showalter and Beer also come into this category as we shall see) is more concerned, as she hoped, with investigating the nature of Hardy's art than with the message he conveys and whether it is 'true' or not. To some extent the study of technique and meaning are bound to be interdependent but in this period we tend to have less concern with what the critic thinks Hardy ought to be saying and more with trying to assess what he has to say and how he actually says it - in other words, criticism is less dogmatic and prescriptive.

Ian Gregor's The Great Web (1974), is a more detailed and extended consideration of Hardy's work in the light of his contention that contemporary criticism takes too little account of the novel as process and, in particular, of the importance of story. He chooses the increasingly popular image of the web as the basis of his criticism of Hardy for the obvious reason that he believes works of fiction cannot be pinned down and that as we read they are constantly developing and changing. He sees the image of the web as,

.....a ruling idea in Hardy's development as a novelist, an idea which at once determines the shape of the fiction and its substance.<sup>64</sup>

Thus the web serves as an analogy for both form and content, as it does in the work of other critics since 1970. Like others, too, Gregor implies that Hardy's art should not be seen in Jamesian terms:

Where James finds his key term  
in structure, Hardy finds his in  
story.<sup>65</sup>

In Gregor's reading The Woodlanders is at the centre of Hardy's achievement because in this novel, 'the whole web becomes fully defined, and we can see nature, work and sex shown as inter-connecting'. This communal interweaving hints, in turn, at a greater social and hence universal design beyond; like the web it is never still or fixed and cannot really be described as being a structure or pattern because of this.

The Woodlanders, with its interweaving of literary forms, ideas about nature, and its sense of community is the subject of a good deal of critical scrutiny in this period. Lodge's essay on this novel, The Woodlanders: A Darwinian Pastoral Elegy,<sup>66</sup> argues, as the title suggests, for the novel's functioning at several different levels. Lodge argues also here against what he sees as the naïve view of critics like Kettle and Brown who read the novel as 'a lament for the passing of a traditional agrarian culture under the impact of "progress" industrialisation and metropolitan values'.<sup>67</sup> Such critics have chosen, says Lodge, to ignore the extent to which The Woodlanders shows 'brutal and ruthless evolutionary struggle'. There are, as Lodge illustrates, many passages in the novel which show how deeply Hardy has assimilated Darwin's ideas. In fact, as Lodge

shows, some of those passages are strikingly similar to passages from The Origin of Species. Thus, while Hardy certainly does lament the passing of the old traditional rural world he sees it as inevitable that changes should occur - it is part of his 'linear and evolutionary view of history'.

#### (IV) Hardy and Darwin

The extent to which Hardy was influenced by evolutionary theories and particularly by Darwin's work, and the way in which this radically affected not only his outlook but the form of his fiction, received attention from several critics, including Lodge, but is treated most thoroughly by Roger Ebbatson and Gillian Beer in their studies. Ebbatson maintains that far from having a depressing and negative effect on art and thought in the later Victorian period, 'evolutionary theory acted as a creative stimulus to the novelistic imagination'. He claims that evidence of study of theory is, in the cases of Hardy and Lawrence 'incontrovertible' and 'becomes a defining characteristic of the novels themselves'. Thus, for Ebbatson, as is made clear by the following extract, the idea of evolution provides a model or structure for Hardy's work:

A writer like Hardy was enabled creatively to restructure his imagination in the light of The Origin of Species, in a prolonged and seminal process of reorientation..... Through a kind of ingestion, literature took into itself elements of an extraneous system which got expressed rhetorically through figurative devices, characterisation and structure. A novel like The Woodlanders, therefore, may validly be read as a work which translates Darwin into another medium.<sup>68</sup>.

However, the important feature of evolutionary theory which made



it so adaptable to the novel was, according to Ebbatson, its 'demolition' of the idea of fixed species and its replacing of this idea with one of the world as a complex of processes, 'in which essence is replaced by becoming'. Since the novel is about development and process - both form and content are built upon such a model - it seems very likely that such an assimilation of ideas into the novel's structure would take place. This, at any rate, is Ebbatson's view:

.....the propositions expounded by Darwin flowed into and became part of the novelist's imaginative equipment, part of his sense of self. Evolution, that is to say, came to be taken as a poetic construct or enabling myth which fertilised the novelist's imagination, just as the new romantic biology led to the sprouting organic life of art nouveau.<sup>69</sup>

But Ebbatson stresses that the 'construct' is not a fixed structure or model:

Such a form went beyond the Romantic concern for organic structure: it perceived human life, and the art which sought to image that life, as a system of complex rhythmic processes of creation and disintegration.<sup>70</sup>

The novelist who saturated himself in Darwinism (Hardy, Forster and Lawrence are Ebbatson's examples) thus seems to have adopted deconstructive patterns rather than structural ones, according to Ebbatson. This certainly seems to be his view of the way in which Hardy used evolutionary theory:

Evolution became a model for social change by showing how patterns could be traced in an evolving culture.<sup>71</sup>

Hardy's reliance on chance and coincidence to drive his fiction along may also be explained by reference to Darwinism; such incidents are, 'a mode of dramatising the vital element of chance in the creation and survival of species and individuals, especially in its matching and mismatching of the sexes'.<sup>72</sup>

Undoubtedly this and other aspects of Hardy's ideas and art owe something to Darwin's theories, particularly as presented in The Descent of Man where Darwin has much to say about sexual selection, but one feels that Ebbatson may be attributing more to the direct influence of Darwinian theory than is actually the case. Hardy's vision of life as dominated by chance rather than purpose could as well have arisen from personal experience and from observation of life as from theory. When Ebbatson says, for instance, that 'the creation of Diggory Venn owes much to the thesis of protective colouring', one is inclined to retort that this may have been quite coincidental. Such influences are hard to prove and need to be supported by close reference to and analysis of the text. Key scenes singled out by Ebbatson as embodying theories of sexual attraction or matching are the obvious ones such as Troy's sword exercise, and Angel's luring of Tess with harp music. I do not wish to imply that such scenes are not significant nor that they have not something to do with the impact of evolutionary theory and a consequent new perspective on human and animal behaviour. The problem is rather that by arguing for the decisive influence of one particular theory upon the writer's art and thought such critics leave us with the impression that other influences are relatively unimportant and their readings of the novels often leave out evidence which conflicts with their critical position, and they tend to attribute much in the text to the impact of the theory which could be argued to derive from

other sources. As Philip Larkin said of Arnold Kettle's Marxist interpretation of Tess, such criticism can leave the reader feeling 'uncomfortable rather than illuminated'.<sup>73</sup>

Gillian Beer's study of Darwin and the impact of Darwinism on nineteenth century fiction, Darwin's Plots (1983), covers much the same ground as Ebbatson's book but her work is far more scholarly and elaborately detailed in its argument. She expresses herself in the manner of the new critical theorists but uses the vocabulary with masterly precision. Ebbatson's terminology is sometimes rather loose and vague, although superficially easier to understand. The similarities between Beer's work and Ebbatson's are evident at the outset:

.....evolutionary theory had particular implications for narrative and for the composition of fiction. Because of its preoccupation with time and with change evolutionary theory has inherent affinities with the problems and processes of narrative.<sup>74</sup>

Like Ebbatson too, she sees Darwinian theory as underscoring the idea, also present in fiction, of life as an endless process of change; it thus fits comfortably into a deconstructionist reading of Hardy's novels - as it did for Ebbatson. Darwinian theory, she says, is 'multivalent'; it has 'an extraordinary hermeneutic potential - the power to yield a great number of significant and various meanings', and she goes on,

Darwinian theory.....excludes or suppresses certain orderings of experience. It has no place for 'stasis'. It debars return. It does not countenance absolute replication (cloning is its contrary), pure invariant cycle, or

constant equilibrium. Nor - except for the extinction of particular species - does it allow either interruption or conclusion.<sup>75</sup>

The connection here between Beer's reading of Darwin and a deconstructionist reading of Hardy is that both deny the possibility of unity in the sense of total coherence - nothing is ever fixed for long enough in time or space to justify describing it in a single correct manner. All must be seen as relative.

Beer also follows Ebbatson fairly closely in arguing that pessimism was not the only, nor necessarily the main consequence of Hardy's familiarity with Darwin's work, but where he wrote rather loosely of Hardy 'ingesting' the theory, Beer writes specifically about its effects upon Hardy's plots. The various systems, whether identified as nature, law or fate, which lie outside the control of humankind and which Hardy sees as 'crass casualty' are manifested in his fiction as plot. As Beer remarks, 'plot becomes malign and entrapping, because it is designed without the needs of individual life in mind'.<sup>76</sup> This is remarkably similar to Lodge's reading of *Jude* as 'a closed system of disappointment' and testifies to both critics' close involvement with the way in which structuralist and poststructuralist theory can be applied to criticism of fiction. Beer's comparison of Hardy with Darwin even extends to Hardy's role as narrator:

Hardy like Darwin places himself in his texts as observer, traveller, a conditional presence of seeing things from multiple distances and diverse perspectives almost in the same moment.<sup>77</sup>

What the narrator sees, in both cases, is a wider perspective in which individuals and even species are ultimately of no account but, on the other hand, he also sees in the present moment, life in all its diversity and plenitude and particularity. This, says Beer, accounts for the incongruity of Hardy's vision and artistic method and she cites the incident where Knight is suspended from the cliff in A Pair of Blue Eyes as an example of this. Thus the central problem for Hardy in his fiction is 'to find a scale for the human':

The absolute gap between our finite capacities and the infinite time and space of the universe burdens Hardy's texts with a sense of malfunction and apprehension. There is a collapse of congruity between the human and the objects of human knowledge and human emotion.<sup>78</sup>

What makes Hardy's works positive in outlook is that they contain, as do Darwin's, 'a strongly surviving belief in the "recuperative powers" which pervade both language and the physical world'.

It is characteristic of criticism of this period to interpret Hardy's novels with reference to differing perspectives of time and space, and to see both reader and narrator as passive watchers or spectators. This sense of distances, as if one were outside of the web or at the other end of the kaleidoscope, looking in at the patterns, is common to the criticism of almost all those who have written on Hardy since 1970. While such a critical position can be illuminating, it sometimes appears over-contrived, insisting as it does upon the patterning of experience in novels, whether it is perceived as static or moving.

John Bayley's criticism of Hardy eschews such stances and remains illuminating in spite of a certain quirkiness.<sup>79</sup> It does not so much set out to interpret Hardy as to give some impressions of the effects of reading his work. In fact Bayley seems determined at least to attempt to describe things in his own language rather than that of the fashionable critical theorists. Writing of Hardy's role as narrator in his novels he is fundamentally in agreement with Miller, Grundy, Beer et al. but where they describe the narrator as a kind of disembodied 'watcher' Bayley preserves the sense of the narrator also being a personality, of him being Hardy himself.

Hardy's vulnerability within his own novel, is that of a private man in a public place, a shy man in a salon, anxious to learn how it goes, and conform to its manners while taking his own observations.<sup>80</sup>

Bayley maintains that we want to read Hardy's novels again and again for their 'flavour and texture' and because we are aware of Hardy as 'a presence with all the intimacy of a self but none of its proclamation or insinuation'.<sup>81</sup> Thus, for him, Hardy's temperament and presence in the novels are an important part of the experience of reading his work. Many of Bayley's comments are veiled criticisms of structuralist and deconstructionist methods of analysis. He denies structure altogether, claiming that all the elements of Hardy's work are disparate:

"All thinking things, all objects of all thought" were not to him impelled by one motion and spirit: very much the opposite.<sup>82</sup>

For Bayley, as for Hardy himself, Hardy's art is closest not to

ideas but to daily impressions, the appearances of people and things - though not in the realist sense refuses to distance himself:

.....we may be more at home in the space, time and texture of his novels than when we are receiving the whole impression of their scope and plan.<sup>83</sup>.

Bayley also goes against the grain of contemporary critical thinking in maintaining that artistic intentions should be given consideration in assessing a work. He says they are,

.....always of the first importance, even if we may agree to disregard them or to feel the novel has achieved some sort of independence of them.<sup>84</sup>.

In both criticising and reading Hardy's work the sense of the author's personality and presence is important to Bayley:

Our removal into Hardy's world is always 'combined with rest', the sense of repose which comes from our awareness of the author's vicinity during that corporeal journey.<sup>85</sup>.

Reading Hardy's work is not usually described in terms of repose although, as Bayley asserts, there is a restfulness about being led through a Hardy novel. This rather makes one wonder whether too much emphasis has been placed on the tensions and contradictions in Hardy's world; Bayley's reading is a corrective to this.

(V) Feminist Criticism

Bayley claims in his study of Hardy that, 'true sensitivity, wholly familiar with the author's own, is in Hardy's fiction the prerogative of women'; this shows an affinity with what is in my view the best feminist criticism of Hardy. Tess, for instance, may not appear to be at all like Madame Bovary but in formal terms they have a great deal in common for Bayley,

Both are closely identified with their authors, and yet presented with an appearance of objectivity.<sup>86</sup>

Rosalind Miles makes a similar point about the connection between Hardy's women characters and his own temperament:

In the female condition he discovered an objective correlative of his own emotional state, and his deep-rooted convictions about the entire system of things.<sup>87</sup>

She sees Hardy's women as the novelist's search for self which accounts for their elusiveness. This kind of criticism of the female principle in Hardy's novels which relates it to his artistic sensibility seems to be more profitable than that which Penny Boumelha outlines as typical of recent criticism of Hardy's women:

Many of the more recent critics have followed one of two paths: either they have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views of women's character and sphere of action, or else they have remarked on his particular interest in and sympathy with woman.<sup>88</sup>



She goes on to comment that,

It is perhaps not surprising that women predominate among the first group and men among the second.<sup>89</sup>.

This rather bald assertion is backed up by a few short and unimpressive quotations, one of which is from Virginia Woolf, who can hardly be described as a 'recent' critic. Boumelha's polarisation of the views of male critics and female critics is evidence of her own political brand of feminism but does not really tell us much about the presence of women and female qualities in Hardy's fiction and their role.

Boumelha does, however, recognise the merits of a specifically feminist reading of Hardy like Elaine Showalter's 'The Unmanning of The Mayor of Casterbridge',<sup>90</sup> which she describes as a 'persuasive reading'. In this essay Showalter argues convincingly that Hardy's heroes and particularly Henchard, have to become more female - to recognise the feminine principle in themselves in order to come to terms with themselves and hence to grow more human:

For the heroes of the tragic novels - Michael Henchard, Jude Fawley, Angel Clare - maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, an identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their own deepest selves.<sup>91</sup>.

Henchard's movement towards maturity and self-discovery which in turn make him more vulnerable is a process of 'unmanning':

It is in the analysis of this New Man, rather than in the evaluation of Hardy's new women, that the case for Hardy's feminist sympathies may be argued.<sup>92</sup>

I do not wish to repeat here the details of Showalter's discussion of The Mayor but it incorporates many excellent features and is based upon the psychological and philosophical premise that the male's sense of maleness is dependent upon what is not male, i.e. upon a recognition of femaleness. To be fully sensitive and alive means realising that the one complements the other, and Showalter agrees with Bayley and Miles when she concludes:

The skills which Henchard struggles finally to learn, skills of observation, attention, sensitivity, and compassion, are also those of the novelist.....<sup>93</sup>.

With feminist criticism being a developing area of literary study there is surely still much to be said about Hardy's depiction of sex and gender. Showalter's essay points such criticism in a helpful direction - towards Hardy's art and away from simplistic discussions of the women characters.

#### (VI) Summary

In spite of what amounts to a virtual obsession with finding structures beneath the surface of Hardy's work, or shifting patterns in its form; in spite of the over-use of images of webs and threads and perspectives of time and space, there is much of value in the critical developments since 1970 as they affect Hardy's fiction. In the sixties often rather crude psychological

and sociological perspectives dominated criticism; since 1970 they seem to have settled down, as it were, to become part of an overall picture of Hardy's work. Critics rarely make claims for their approach being the ultimate and final answer to interpretation of Hardy. One or two extended studies have been written from an exclusively psychological or sociological perspective,<sup>94</sup> but these rely to a great extent upon earlier works and provide little of interest or originality. Thus, while Hardy is now seen as having an awareness of the extent to which the old rural communities were being destroyed, his novels are no longer, as in the fifties, read as treatises protesting against that change. Raymond Williams' view of the rural communities suffering from tensions within as well as pressures from outside seems to prevail,<sup>95</sup> and Holloway's suggestion<sup>96</sup> that there was an inherent passivity and weakness about the communities anyway, is taken up by Lodge and others as proof of Hardy's Darwinian perspective. What was, in the fifties, an almost absurd over-statement of the case for Hardy as an unwitting Marxist has now been tempered and what was valuable about the approach - its recognition of the importance of historical change in Hardy's novels - seems to have been sensibly assimilated.

Similarly the psychological complexity of some of Hardy's characters was rather over-stated in the sixties whereas in this period, the range and depth of his psychological insights is rather taken for granted and received little explicit comment. There is more concentration upon how psychological abnormalities are conveyed fictionally than upon their precise nature and origin. The power of sexual attraction and the whole business of gender and sexuality are linked both to biology and to psychology. Showalter's

feminist approach works upon the assumption that, as Kramer puts it,

Hardy perceives sex-traits as psychological in origin, not as exclusive properties of one sex or the other.<sup>97</sup>

There is also a connection between psychological theory and the sense which still prevails of the dissonances and incongruities of Hardy's world. The idea of a surface reality with a substratum which is patterned according to some other principle than that of probability or logic is seen as a structural feature of Hardy's fiction. This owes something to the Freudian notion of the conscious and the subconscious but it is so deeply embedded in the very perceptions of the age that disentangling the threads is virtually impossible. The point is that psychological theories, like theories of society and those derived from biology, are now seen as fundamental to the very structure of novels rather than as ideas which are discussed or dramatised in them. A study of the work of Beer and Ebbatson has shown the way in which evolution is now regarded not as a theory or collection of ideas but as a structuring principle of fiction and of the artist's imagination. In both their works, Hardy's fiction plays a central role in the argument that process and change inform both the theory of evolution and the novel as a literary genre.

All the criticism discussed so far in this chapter is based upon the assumption that Hardy is a great writer and that there may be various different ways of explaining this greatness. The growing feeling that there is probably no such thing as a correct interpretation of a literary work seems to me to be an advantage of

criticism in this period but the assumption that Hardy is a great writer whose work only needs to be further investigated for more 'threads' and evidences of skill and insight, is becoming a little too entrenched. This points to the weakness of some of the new critical theories behind the practice exemplified here; their placing of the critic in a passive, non-evaluative role, displaying skills of interpretation without any responsibility for assessing whether a work has finally any value or 'truth', means that assumptions about a writer's greatness or otherwise tend to go unexamined. The upsurge of critical interest in Hardy's so-called 'minor' novels would be welcome if they were being re-assessed but they are not really. Critics show how 'clever' the structuring of The Well-Beloved is<sup>98</sup>. (this was noticed by Proust in the nineteenth century)<sup>99</sup>. but this does not prove that it is a novel worth reading. Similarly, The Woodlanders appears to be a particularly appropriate text to exemplify theories of evolution or of social decay since much critical attention is paid to it. It may be patterned in an admirably web-like manner but why does it not hold readers' interest in the way that Tess or The Mayor do? In continuing ever more elaborate methods for describing the workings of fiction, critics are in danger of neglecting the more obvious elements.

A concluding look at a critical work which calls into question many of the assumptions of criticism between 1970 and 1980 will point to possible future developments in critical attitudes to Hardy's fiction. C. H. Salter's Good Little Thomas Hardy (1981) travels in the opposite direction from most criticism in recent years in claiming (as did Philip Larkin in 1964) that Hardy is an 'uncomplex writer'. He suggests that Hardy may well be overrated

and gives some reasons for this view. Although rather prescriptive and often, one might say, 'bad-tempered' in tone, Salter's criticism does draw attention to what have become largely critical commonplaces in recent years. For instance, Salter claims that Hardy's use of coincidence in the novels is often no more than a narrative convenience. He also claims that Hardy is neither a modern nor an intellectual novelist; in fact like many of his critics, he is a lazy thinker. He uses the word nature to mean different things; sometimes it is a moral force, sometimes it is portrayed as amoral - this confuses the reader. Furthermore Salter argues that Hardy is not a Darwinian; his work shows a vague awareness of evolution but this does not make him a Darwinian. His pessimism too has been attributed to philosophical influences and to an awareness of the modern condition. Salter believes that he 'expresses a pessimism not produced by modern causes, but timeless and congenital'. Hardy's idea of tragedy is also much less complex than has been held; according to Salter it is 'simple and mediaeval'. Likewise his social theories; Salter takes several critics, including Brown, Kettle, Raymond Williams and Merryn Williams, to task for their claims that Hardy is an important social critic. Their perspective has so dominated criticism that a full picture of Hardy's social ideas has never emerged. Salter argues that 'a detailed study is needed of the whole range of Hardy's social criticism'; he also maintains that Hardy's thought owes as much, if not more, to eighteenth-century than the nineteenth and goes so far as to say that 'nineteenth-century ideologies then, had little effect on Hardy.....'

So far as the form of Hardy's fiction is concerned, Salter

maintains that he, like Hillis Miller, finds Hardy repetitious, but unlike Miller he does not see it as a reason to praise Hardy for his skills in patterning his art. For him it is a sign of Hardy's limitations:

Hardy repeats not only pages, paragraphs and sentences but general ideas, themes and motifs, the same elements in his presentation of Wessex, and the same favourite words and stylistic and rhetorical elements.<sup>100</sup>

Thus Hardy is not seen by Salter as particularly original or inventive; he thinks that the Victorian view of him as a successor to (and imitator of) George Eliot was fairly accurate. He writes of rural life, peasant characters, the tragedy of circumstance, and like her uses dialect and incorporates authorial comment into the work in a philosophical manner. A look at Adam Bede, says Salter, shows 'how much more he owed her than has been realised'. He argues that this novel positively influenced Under the Greenwood Tree and Far From the Madding Crowd - the similarities are more than coincidental.

Having contradicted some received opinions about Hardy in a rather heavy-handed way, Salter goes on to say that although there are faults in Hardy's narrative art there is also 'magnificent narrative, forward movement'. What he bids us remember is that criticism is in danger of over-stating the cosmic, eternal, universal, aspects of Hardy's novels and of forgetting that he is first and foremost a realistic novelist. We do not meet the essential Hardy when we stand back and view his works from a distance as unified wholes but in 'atomic perceptions' within the

text.

Many of Salter's views are clearly not fully supported by readings of the texts; some of his ideas are deliberately contentious and seem to be designed to undermine criticism's sense of its own ingenuity and importance. However, in pointing to the way that Hardy has been treated by contemporary critics in a rather over-reverential and over-serious manner, Salter's work does highlight not only the assumptions of the criticism of this period but its weak spots. A possible new direction, back to the consideration of Hardy as a popular realistic novelist of the Victorian period, is here suggested by Salter. It would seem that the critical wheel has come full circle.



NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

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Ann Jefferson and David Robey (Eds.), Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction. London 1982.
3. Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory. An Introduction. Oxford 1983. p.p.91-92.
4. Ibid. p.94.
5. See Chapter Four, Section Three, of this study.
6. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (Eds.), Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction. London 1982. p.14.
7. David Lodge, Working with Structuralism. London 1981. Preface, p.viii.
8. Ibid. p.vii.
9. Ibid. p.ix.
10. Ibid. p.108.

11. Raman Selden, A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory. Sussex 1985. p.1.
12. Eagleton, p.138.
13. Ibid. p.129.
14. Dale Kramer (Ed.), Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy. London 1979. p.10.
15. See Lentricchia, After the New Criticism.
16. Eagleton, p.55.
17. Ibid. p.59.
18. J. Hillis Miller, Distance and Desire. Cambridge, Mass. 1970. Preface, p.xi.
19. Ibid. p.xii.
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24. Ibid. p.270.

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27. Ibid. p.21.
28. Lentricchia, After the New Criticism. p.186.
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30. Ibid. p.120.
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32. Miller, Fiction and Repetition. p.127.
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34. See p. 330 of this study for fuller quotation.
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36. Ibid. p.10.
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38. Lodge, p.80.
39. In: Working with Structuralism, p.p.106-113.

40. Ibid. p.107.
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42. Ibid. p.85.
43. Ibid. p.85.
44. Ibid. p.93.
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56. Critical Quarterly 10, 1968. See Chapter Five, Section Two.
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58. Lodge, 'Thomas Hardy as a Cinematic Novelist', in Working with Structuralism, p.p.95-105.
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Emma Clifford, 'The Child: the Circus: and Jude the Obscure'. Cambridge Journal, 7 1954. See Chapter Four.
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63. Ibid. p.167.

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69. Ibid. p.xvii.
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71. Ibid. p.8.
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78. Ibid. p.254.
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81. Ibid. p.7.
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83. Ibid. p.77.
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85. Ibid. p.237.
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87. Rosalind Miles, 'The Women of Wessex', in Ann Smith (Ed.), The Novels of Thomas Hardy. London 1979.
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100. C. H. Salter, Good Little Thomas Hardy. London 1981. p.101.



## CONCLUSION

At the close of the last chapter I remarked that it seemed the critical wheel had come full circle. This was in response to C. H. Salter's criticism in Good Little Thomas Hardy (1981) where he challenges some of the current critical orthodoxies about Hardy's art and thought. As I stated, Salter cannot be claimed as a really first-rate critic because, by his own admission, his approach tends to be somewhat negative. He puts it this way in his preface:

In what follows I have tried to restore to the reader his freedom to response to Hardy in what, to Hardy, can be the only right way - simply. This has resulted in a largely negative and destructive approach, even in my final, more positive, chapter.....

The value of Salter's criticism lies in its questioning of a number of critical assumptions about Hardy's work and in its suggestion of the kind of revaluation which may be necessary. In many respects it serves a similar function to Roy Morrell's criticism in Thomas Hardy. The Will and The Way (1965) which was discussed in Chapter Five (see pp 286-289). In this work Morrell claimed that critics too readily accepted that Hardy was a pessimist and a determinist and that in fact he was neither. While tending to overstate his case and to assert rather than argue it, Morrell's criticism nevertheless had the effect of making Hardy critics think again about the nature of his thought and its embodiment in his fiction.

Salter, as we saw, cited a number of reasons for his dissatisfaction

with the critical view of both Hardy's art and thought but one of the chief was the tendency for critics in recent years to portray him as a complex and highly inventive artist. It is because of this overstressing of the complexity of Hardy's art that Salter maintains that we should once more try to respond to him 'simply'. By this he does not mean that we should view Hardy simple-mindedly, naïvely or uncritically but that there is a need to respond directly and honestly to the experience of reading Hardy's novels as realistic narratives. Like John Bayley,<sup>1</sup> whose criticism also goes against the current critical grain, Salter takes issue with the excessive attention paid by critics to discovering a key unifying element or coherent pattern in the art of the novels. Jean Brooks' Thomas Hardy, The Poetic Structure (1971) is one of the works he cites as an example of this excessive attention to coherence and overall unity in Hardy criticism and while being rather harsh in his judgement of this work Salter demonstrates its shortcomings most ably. For instance, of Brooks' over-emphasis on the structural significance of the ballad element in Hardy's work he comments:

Of course the ballad is a strong influence on and element in Hardy, but it will not provide that key to the good that we are looking for..... The trouble with the ballad is also the trouble with substance, the universe, the cosmos, the eternal. Critics have accepted these too easily.<sup>2</sup>

Salter's view is that writing about Hardy in such grand and general terms becomes tedious and repetitive - and ultimately meaningless - if it is not balanced by criticism which attends, in a scholarly way, to the particularities of artistic presentation. Like John Bayley again, Salter maintains that there is not

much to be gained from looking for artistic coherence across Hardy's oeuvre. Bayley remarks that,

.....we may be more at home in the space, time and texture of his novels than we are in receiving the whole impression of their scope and plan.<sup>3</sup>

Salter makes a similar point. He quotes several of Hardy's rather odd images for illustration, one of which (and Bayley also quotes it) is of a jacket 'rolled and compressed.....till it was about as large as an apple-dumpling'. Such an image, according to Salter,

.....can be, and in the better work is, relevant, part of a larger whole; but it is in such atomic perceptions that we meet the essential Hardy.<sup>4</sup>

It is at this level that Salter thinks Hardy is original and inventive but the same cannot be said of his work as a whole. He is often, as Salter demonstrates with many examples, imitative and extremely repetitious and uses many of the same words, phrases, ideas and narrative and stylistic devices on several different occasions. This kind of repetition, as Salter argues, is different from that which involves repeating images or themes which form the symbolic structure of a work.

While Salter's lists of examples of Hardy's repetitions and his borrowings from the art and ideas of other writers often convince us of his own pedantry rather than Hardy's uninventiveness, his broad claim that we too readily accept Hardy's art as being complex, intricate and original, is borne out by what has been discovered in the course of this study. One of the most

insistent urges in Hardy criticism since the 1890's has been the need to prove that he was a conscious and deliberate artist; this has manifested itself in the search for form and structure in his novels. The impulse began as a reaction against the mid-Victorian conception of the novel as entertainment, as something not to be taken seriously as art. The movement away from solidly Victorian ideas about the novel was, as we saw, led largely by James and his followers (such as Lubbock) who thought of the typically English novel of the period as 'a loose baggy monster'.

Thus, in the period between about 1900-1930, Hardy came to be seen not so much as a failed Realist whose stereotyped characters and incredible plots betrayed incompetence but, by the most articulate critics, as a forerunner of the Jamesian or modern novel because of his conscious and deliberate structuring of his novels according to some dramatic or architectural principle. The most astute Victorian critics had also seen this (e.g. Proust, Patmore) just as they had realised that Hardy was a serious artist and not just a sensational serial novelist; (we recall Barrie, for example, claiming that Hardy knew that 'Fiction is not necessarily a substitute for marbles').<sup>5</sup> The notion of Hardy as a serious and deliberate artist was most prominent in the early 1900's and led to The Return of the Native being much acclaimed for its high-mindedness and its dramatic unity. A novel like Tess was seen as being marred by its melodramatic and sensational qualities, though its greatness was never really called into question.

The same concern with unity and wholeness is manifested in the criticism of the 1930's and 1940's; however, after 1940 (the year of the centennial issue of Southern Review), the unity is seen to

lie more particularly in Hardy's tone. Zabel writes of Hardy's 'spell' and of his work expressing 'modern man's typical agony'. Where critics of the earlier twentieth century had found wholeness in a sense of harmony and proportion - the parts fully integrated into the whole - these mid-century critics (Zabel and Guerard are the main exponents of the view) find the key to Hardy's aesthetic in disharmony and incongruity and he comes increasingly to be seen as an allegorical and symbolic writer using poetic techniques to reveal psychological truths and to capture the spirit of the times. He is still seen as a precursor of the modern, but not any longer because of his architectural structuring or his advanced and radical ideas but because, in his anti-realism, he is giving artistic expression to an illogical and absurd view of life which is the true vision for the twentieth century. Thus the macabre and supernatural elements of Hardy's fiction are seen now as deliberately promoting an artistic vision and not as flaws and the reliance in plot on accident and coincidence comes to be seen as a way of dramatising this same vision of life as absurd - a kind of Kafkaesque nightmare. It was also at this time that Hardy came to be associated with Dickens whose macabre qualities and theatricality also appealed to the tastes of a somewhat disillusioned generation of critics. The mood of the period is well exemplified by Guerard's statement in 1949 (also quoted in Chapter Three, p.188):

We have rediscovered, to our sorrow, the demonic in human nature as well as in..... political processes; our everyday experience has been both intolerable and improbable, but even more improbable than intolerable.....Between the two wars the most vital literary movements.....arrived at the same conclusions.....that experience is more often macabre than not.<sup>6</sup>

The linking of Hardy with Dickens was a new departure since he has been most often likened to George Eliot and George Meredith on account of his similar intellectual interests. This change of direction in Hardy criticism reflects, as was made clear in the course of discussion and as Guerard's comment implies, a different way of perceiving life.

Since the 1940's Hardy has been considered by almost every critic as an original and highly inventive artist rather than as a serious intellectual or a well-proportioned writer in the Jamesian tradition. The search for form and structure in his novels has not, however, abated. In the 1950's Kettle and Brown saw his novels as fundamentally unified in being expressions of anger and sadness at the passing of the old agricultural way of life. This, as has been argued, reflected their own concerns and beliefs rather than Hardy's.<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent's essay on Tess<sup>8</sup> perceived the novel as a 'world' and discussed it in terms of 'integral structure'; in her view novels must be shown to have integral structure before they can be judged at all. For her also, Hardy's philosophical abstractions are like 'bits of philosophic adhesive tape'. Just as for Carpenter in the early 1960's they are like 'lumps of uncooked porridge'.<sup>9</sup> The same insistence upon novels as discrete wholes prevails throughout the 1960's although there are some dissenting voices. Ian Gregor, for instance, argues that readings of Hardy's novels as aesthetic objects fail to take into account the importance of story.<sup>10</sup> David Lodge too senses that criticism is becoming too involved with its own sense of itself as a strongly theoretical discipline and a profession and is not concerned with reading novels closely and sensitively in order to convey something of the experience or process of reading them.

In the 1970's and 1980's, with the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist theories, the idea of form in the novel becomes more elaborate and complex but is still the overriding preoccupation of critics of Hardy's fiction. One of the main assumptions, as both Salter and Bayley point out, is that the realistic narrative is some kind of superficial top layer to the novels and that beneath this we have 'underpattern', 'under-thought', or 'undertext', as it is variously called, which may reside in a structure of myth and archetype or be seen in terms of distance and proximity, or contrast and repetition. Structuralist critics tend to see the design as a definite and fixed principle of organisation, deconstructionists as a quivering web or as a woven tapestry with no single unifying principle but an ever-shifting matrix. Some criticism of this kind (I am thinking of that by Miller and Lodge, particularly) is sensitive and revealing about the nature of Hardy's design and patterning of his art but, as was suggested in the last chapter, there are drawbacks to this method. Firstly, as Salter remarks of Jean Brooks's criticism,

In Mrs. Brooks's account, the opposite of 'poetic underpattern' in Tess and Far From the Madding Crowd is 'surface narrative'.<sup>11</sup>

The tendency for the two to become polarised and for the narrative to seem relatively unimportant is also evident in Lodge's criticism of The Woodlanders (see pp 335-337) where he implies that Hardy, as a Victorian novelist, had to have a realistic surface but that the substructure of the pastoral reveals his naturally lyric and poetic genius. Bayley, like Salter, challenges such polarisation:

Our sense of an undertext is often most marked in Hardy when the plot is most emphatically at work on the surface.<sup>12</sup>.

Thus both these critics point to a need for Hardy's critics to take more account of 'the narrative surface' as part of the experience of the fiction and not to discuss it as merely surface. This accords with Ian Gregor's insistence in the 1960's and 1970's that reading as a process and story as an unfolding of events must be considered in criticising Hardy's novels. The way forward would be for critics to stop focusing so much upon the poetic design of the fiction and to return to consideration of it as having a realistic narrative base which perhaps contributes to, rather than detracts from, the art.

Many of the elements of Hardy's fiction which have not received much critical attention in recent years are those which make up the realistic narrative 'surface'. It is generally accepted, for instance, that Hardy's plots are symbolic statements about his vision of existence and should not be seen as examples of flawed narrative method. Perhaps, as Salter suggests, it is time to revise this estimate; one need not necessarily follow his view that the plots are often the result of 'narrative convenience' but it might be useful to consider them once again as part of the narrative and not just as symbolic of something else. A close study of their function and effect upon the characters and action of the novels might offer something other than the two opposing views so far offered by criticism of them as either hugely improbable or as symbols for a vision of life as absurd. The recent study by Gillian Beer of the impact of Darwinian theory upon the conception and execution of plot in the nineteenth



century novel,<sup>13</sup> while suggesting the similarities between the theory of evolution as constant process and the novel as process, does still see plot largely as a feature of design and not as a means of driving the narrative forward.

A further difficulty which criticism has experienced with Hardy's novels is over his methods of characterisation. Hardy's late Victorian critics and reviewers took the characters very literally and judged them by their likeness to life - in the most obvious sense of expecting them to be natural, even ordinary, and certainly not stereotyped or fantastical as in Dickens. Many of these late Victorians also concerned themselves with the morality of the characters, with whether their conduct set a good example for life. This was very much an issue in criticism of Tess and Jude. Later critics have seen this approach to character as naive and misconceived; some have criticised the characters for lacking development and psychological complexity but the general pattern has been (since 1940 certainly) to see them as portraying psychological obsessions or of being, like the plots, symbolic or representative in some way. Henchard has come in for much of this kind of treatment, as has Tess, and both have been viewed as symbolising their community's fate or as representative tragic figures in the universal scheme. We see here a similar pattern to that of critical attitudes to the plots - a polarisation between the realistic and the symbolic. R. B. Heilman, following John Bayley, (see Chapter Five pp 283-286) pointed to these different views of character as either designed or drawn from nature and concluded that in Hardy design was often intended but that the impulse for a character to 'live' rather than exist as part of a structure, overcame Hardy's sense of design. The two elements of

characterisation are thus seen by Heilman as opposing each other, which may account for critics seeing either the realistic, natural side of them or their symbolic function. What Heilman does not suggest because, like so many other post-war Hardy critics, he sees his fiction mainly in terms of duality and ambiguity, is that perhaps Hardy's characters combine in a unique way the ability to be representative or symbolic and the ability to appear natural.

The same dichotomy has arisen in treatment of Hardy's language and style. Early Hardy critics, when they mentioned it at all, wrote of it as unpolished and grammatically flawed. Among the early critics only Vernon Lee<sup>14</sup>. gave the issue extended treatment and her conclusion, after close inspection of a passage from Tess, set the tone for most others, even up to 1966 and Lodge's critical work.<sup>15</sup>. She concluded, as we saw, that although Hardy must be seen as a careless and inconsistent writer, he could not be judged by the standards one would normally apply because his genius somehow transcended the norm. This is clearly an unsatisfying explanation of the working of Hardy's language and style, but Lodge's and Heilman's criticism in the 1960's comes to a rather similar conclusion. Both critics describe Hardy's style as inconsistent, tortured, confusing and as reflecting his own inner tensions and the tensions inherent in his culture. Lodge notes the variety of styles Hardy uses but sees them as conflicting with one another, as inharmonious, and therefore as evidence of 'greatness not quite achieved'. As I commented in discussing Lodge's criticism (see pp 294-297) such a view stems from pre-conceptions about balance and harmony in language and style. It is quite possible to argue that Hardy's 'several voices' are a source of artistic strength because they show vitality, variety and great richness.

Since about 1970, discussions of Hardy's language and style have become subsumed in the larger debate about the structure of his fictional world. Yet there still seems to be a need for an extended study of Hardy's style or styles which could be based upon descriptive analysis but which would consider his 'voices' as an aspect of the art of his novels just as they are an integral, though more fully recognised, aspect of his poetic achievement. It is not really satisfactory to explain Hardy's style in terms of contradiction and tension only, just as it is clearly inadequate to dismiss it as flawed and ungrammatical.

It has been the typical habit of criticism in recent years to explain almost everything in Hardy's work as being the result of tensions which are reflections of the dilemma of modern man. Thus what were seen as inconsistencies or plain errors by his contemporaries come to be seen as the basis for his genius. Salter, ever keen to challenge the prevailing view, rather questions this way of approaching Hardy. He sees Hardy as desiring a release from realism but as being a writer also very much tied to it and unable to leave it behind:

.....behind the duality between realism and unrealism there is a tension between desire for freedom and unwillingness to stray far from ordinary reality, and as a result some confusion.<sup>16</sup>

Salter is, then, not denying that there is tension in the life and the work of Hardy but he does not see it as a source of strength, rather as resulting in confusion. He goes on:

Hardy was not a man to thrive on tension, and his best novels are those in which the dream is closest to the reality.<sup>17</sup>

The critical emphasis upon tension - the paradoxical, contradictory, inconsistent and incongruous - in Hardy's art and ideas has tended to make him seem a more complex and modernist writer than he actually is. This is what Salter is getting at, I think, when he says we should respond to Hardy 'simply'. Nor should we imagine that pattern and design, whether of repetition or contrast are exclusively the insight of recent structuralist and poststructuralist critics. Hardy's 'parallelism' and 'geometry' were noticed by Proust a century earlier.<sup>18</sup> The difference between Proust's perception of such patterns and that of recent critics is that he saw them as evidence of the shaping of art according to a larger, more mysterious shaping of life and the life beyond, as an 'intimation of immortality', whereas mid-twentieth century critics like Zabel, Guerard and Carpenter, see such patterns as arbitrary, shaped according to no kindly order beyond but as evidence of Hardy's vision of existence as absurd, cruel and illogical. Later twentieth century critics like Miller do not see any significance in the patterning of Hardy's fiction at all; it just is, there is no message or meaning to it.

Bayley and Salter both wish to re-establish the notion of Hardy as a personality in the novels, guiding us through them and as one whose experiences and intentions may be taken into account in explaining his art. Salter frequently considers Hardy the man and Hardy the artist as one and the same, as is shown in the comment above about Hardy not being a man to thrive on tension and this being reflected in his art. Bayley is in broad agreement with this when he says that in removing ourselves into Hardy's world we undergo a restful experience, one which brings,

.....the sense of repose which comes from our awareness of the author's vicinity during that corporeal journey.<sup>19</sup>

Thus both critics see Hardy not only as a personality in his art but as a soothing influence on us rather than an artist torn by the pressures of modern life. This goes against the grain of most criticism (at least in the twentieth century) for the emphasis was firstly upon the Jamesian preference for 'showing' rather than 'telling', then upon the autonomous text in New Critical theory, and in structuralist and poststructuralist theory it is upon the author as mouthpiece and the text as writing itself and being rewritten by each successive reader. Salter and Bayley would obviously prefer to restore the idea of the author as 'a man speaking to men' and not as a medium through which the text communicates itself. Their comments suggest that criticism may have gone too far with the idea of the 'disappearing author', just as it may also have gone too far in ceasing to place importance on the text as a unit of meaning which requires analysis and evaluation. Their comments also suggest, I think, that so far as criticism of Hardy's novels is concerned, some kind of synthetic effort is necessary which will bring together the opposing views of him as an artist fraught by tensions and as a helpful and restful presence leading us through the novels at a leisurely pace and who may have something significant to say to us as readers. A return to the rigidly prescriptive criticism of writers like Leavis, Eliot and Kettle on Hardy would be an unwelcome step but if, as Lentricchia put it, the other extreme is criticism as 'a mode of interior decoration', then clearly some middle way or fresh approach must be found.

One of the aspects of Hardy's work which has caused most critical disagreement is the precise nature of his 'philosophy' of life and the relationship between it and his art. As was noted in the last chapter (see p.362) Salter's assessment is that excessive claims have been made for Hardy as a thinker, few of which are justified. The claims made for him as an important and modern social critic are what most concern Salter who takes issue with Kettle, Brown, Maxwell and Raymond Williams over their sociological reading of the Wessex novels. Salter identifies Hardy's favourite social subjects as 'marriage, the church, education and poverty' and proceeds to argue that Hardy's treatment of these subjects is unsystematic and incomplete. Whether this matters for his art is another issue; what Salter is concerned with is proving that Hardy is limited in his social analysis and that the fates of individuals generally come before the fate of society. He concludes that:

The fundamental impulse is neither social reform nor a tragic sense of agricultural collapse, but to record.<sup>20</sup>

As with his criticism of Hardy's artistic achievement, Salter's conclusions are less impressive and original than his suggestions for the kind of critical work which may be useful in the future. He is surely right in his claim that 'A detailed study is needed of the whole range of Hardy's social criticism'; as he says, the sociological approach to Hardy's treatment of social issues has rather dominated and it is time for a fresh examination. Such a study might help to clarify the issue of how far Hardy's depiction of events in his time bears relation to reality and how comprehensive and accurate some of his social criticisms actually are. It

is not so much that Hardy ought to be depicting reality accurately as that many critical disagreements and misunderstandings about this need clearing up. The matter of how far art should reflect everyday reality accurately is a rather different one from whether or not it does.

Salter maintains that 'Hardy's limitations as a social critic may be indicated by contrasting him with George Eliot'. One does not necessarily have to agree with this in order to see the broader general point that criticism should consider Hardy once more as a Victorian thinker, just as his links with other Victorian novelists need re-examining. In considering Hardy as a thinker in the wider sense, and not just a social critic, Salter discusses his debt to other Victorian intellectuals such as Darwin, Mill, Arnold and Leslie Stephen as well as to European thinkers like Schopenhauer, Von Hartmann and Comte. He concludes that they cannot be proved to have had any direct or substantial influence on Hardy's thinking. His approach is made clear by this quotation from the relevant chapter:

Hardy has many points in common with Schopenhauer; pessimism, dislike of Christianity, interest in art, desire for stasis and peace.....Hellenism, a sort of spiritualism, kindness to animals. These all appear before he read Schopenhauer.<sup>21</sup>

When dealing with the influence upon Hardy of Darwinian theory, Salter argues that many instances in the novels which have been attributed to Darwinian influence show evidence only of general knowledge of heredity or geology; in fact, says Salter, 'his normal practice in both prose and verse is to use the traditional contrast between nature and civilisation'. Once again, what is most clearly suggested by Salter's criticism is the need for more

detailed examination of both Hardy's intellectual development and the use of nineteenth century ideas in the texts themselves. As with the treatment of Hardy's social criticism, the stress on him as a precursor of the modern has meant too little attention has been paid in recent years to his relationship with the historical, social and intellectual climate of his own times.

Salter claims that Hardy's philosophy has been over-estimated and that he cannot fairly be claimed as an intellectual or as a contemporary thinker of any real importance. Here he is wrong in his view that critics have taken Hardy as a thinker of some value. Some earlier critics did, as we saw, take Hardy's philosophy seriously but in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's most critics of any note (e.g. Guerard, Van Ghent, Kettle, Carpenter) complained that his thought, whether consistent or otherwise, was not sufficiently integrated into the dramatic structure which is the novel in their view. This is the trouble with Salter's criticism - it is highly suggestive of possible errors and assumptions on the part of other critics but does not strive for absolute accuracy itself. However, by referring to Salter's criticism and occasionally also to that of Bayley, I have indicated some of what I see as the limitations of the critical perspective on Hardy's fiction - particularly the recent critical perspective. Deconstructionist criticism like that practised by Miller has done Hardy a service in that it has shifted critical emphasis away from the single correct reading and has probably signalled an end to those critical readings of his work which were informed largely by moral righteousness and prejudice (for example, those of David Cecil, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and Arnold Kettle). Deconstructionism's subjectivism and relativism, however, can lead to the opposite extreme of literature's seeming to have very little



meaning or value at all, of becoming - to quote Lentricchia's useful phrase once again 'an ultimate mode of interior decoration'.

On the evidence of this examination of critical attitudes to Hardy's novels over the period 1870-1985, it would seem that the possibility of the emergence of any critical approach which will finally reveal the 'real' Hardy and the 'real' meaning of his work is illusory. It is not so much that there is no essential Hardy or essential meaning, although this in itself must raise doubts, as that what is recovered must depend not only upon close study of the texts but also upon an understanding of his cultural milieu, his life and his artistic intentions. Criticism has not focussed enough upon close study of Hardy in relation to his context but has been content largely to make assumptions; scholarship can perhaps help here. How we see the work also depends upon the outlook of the reader (but not exclusively) and upon his or her context, as it were. The text is where author and reader meet; each is in some way a product of various forces and is subject to the limitations that that implies. The whole business of criticism is, to a degree, bound to be limited by subjectivism but not so much so that all discussion about meaning and value becomes impossible - even though it may never be finally agreed.

As we have seen in this study, there have been many changes and developments in critical attitudes to Thomas Hardy's novels; these have not necessarily indicated progress. The most perceptive critics in all the periods under discussion are those who have been able to stand aside from current critical fashions or at least have been able to understand and assimilate them so successfully

that they do not need to use them as a prop. Writers like Lionel Johnson or Proust or Havelock Ellis writing in the late nineteenth century have as much to offer the reader as the most articulate and sophisticated of more recent critics like J. Hillis Miller or David Lodge. If there are different ways of reading Hardy then not all are equally valid; some are better than others because they can be recognised as at least attempting to remain true to the experience of reading Hardy's novels and are not written merely to demonstrate the critic's flair for subtlety of argument or to illustrate an ideological conviction or abstract theory of some kind. If anything has been learned in the course of this study it is that literature must not be used to serve theories only but also to help in the formation of them and this means that criticism must proceed more from the particular to the general rather than vice-versa, which has not always - or even often - been the case.

## NOTES TO CONCLUSION

1. For a discussion of Bayley's An Essay on Hardy, see Chapter Six of this study, pp 354-355.
2. Salter, pp 153-154.
3. Bayley, p.77.
4. Salter, p.160.
5. See Chapter One, p.44.
6. A. J. Guerard, Thomas Hardy, The Novels and Stories. Cambridge, Mass. 1949. pp 3-4.
7. See Chapter Four, Section One of this study.
8. See Chapter Four, pp 231-235.
9. See Chapter Five, p.274.
10. See Chapter Six, pp 346-347.
11. Salter, p.149.
12. Bayley, p.135.
13. For a discussion of Beer's criticism, see Chapter Six of this study, pp 351-353.

14. For a discussion of Lee's essay on Tess in The Handling of Words, see Chapter Two of this study, pp 136-138.
15. See Chapter Five of this study, pp 294-297 for a discussion of Lodge's 'Tess, Nature, and the Voices of Hardy'.
16. Salter, p.157.
17. Salter, p.159.
19. For Proust's comments see Chapter One of this study, p.24.
20. Bayley, p.237.
20. Salter, p.52.
21. Salter, p.57.

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