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Lance St John Butler  
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## Introduction

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and died in 1928. During the eighty-eight years of his life he published fourteen novels, four volumes of short stories, eight volumes of verse and an 'epic-drama', *The Dynasts*.

During his lifetime the most fervent criticism of Hardy concerned itself with his morality: up to and including T. S. Eliot's *After Strange Gods* critics were largely concerned with Hardy's 'pessimism' and his view of God, the universe and marriage. After 1928 there was a swing towards a biographical approach to Hardy occasioned by the almost immediate posthumous publication of *The Life of Thomas Hardy*,<sup>1</sup> ostensibly written by his widow but largely written or dictated by the writer himself.

In more recent years these moral and biographical emphases have given some ground to what we have come to regard as 'normal' criticism; that is to say, to an effort to see Hardy as a novelist and poet and not as a philosopher or a Dorsetshire Victorian. Recent critics have not ignored 'Hardy the man' or 'Hardy's view of life', of course, but a balance has usually been struck along the lines of J. I. M. Stewart's *Thomas Hardy* (1971) in which the first three chapters are 'Hardy's Autobiography', 'Private Life' and 'Intellectual Background'; the ensuing chapters deal with the novels and poems in an objective analytical manner.

In this book I attempt to achieve something of the same balance, with an emphasis on the overall meaning of Hardy's major works. I offer no résumé of his biography, nor do I present a systematic exposition of his views (something he maintained to be impossible), although I believe that his world picture is coherent and that this should be recognized. In chapter 1 I try to elucidate the universe of the Wessex novels and the poems 'from within' and not from a standpoint influenced too greatly by Hardy's own comments (in the *Life* and elsewhere). Naturally, certain main themes emerge from this process, but I do not think that there is any formula or straitjacket into which Hardy can be bundled. As a result, each of the works dealt with here, especially each of the major novels, is

<sup>1</sup> Referred to hereafter as the *Life*. For full details, see Reading List.

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given a different and, I hope, an appropriate sort of analysis. Thus in writing about *Far from the Madding Crowd* I try to work progressively through the novel in order to expose its procession of emotional and seasonal developments, whereas in the chapter on *The Return of the Native* I consider Egdon Heath rather more statically, as I hope befits that novel. In writing about *The Woodlanders* I spend some time analysing Hardy's vocabulary and his language in detail; when we come to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* I am more concerned with the integrated cosmic vision presented in that book, and so on.

There certainly seems to be agreement about which works of Hardy's are most important; it is a consensus with which this book largely concurs, as a glance at the chapter headings will show. I think there is a clear gain to be made by relegating Hardy's less successful performances to their minor rôle and concentrating on the acknowledged masterpieces. It would be wrong, however, to ignore the minor work entirely and I recommend the less-well-known novels to the student of Hardy for the light they throw on his methods and concerns. Even his least-successful productions have an idiosyncratic flavour or a remarkable episode that saves them from ordinariness.

Hardy's own listing of his novels and stories (done for the Wessex Edition of 1912 and given below) makes it clear that his judgement of his work coincided with our own. Not only do the Novels of Character and Environment come first on his list but their very title proclaims them to be serious literature in a way that the words 'Romance', 'Fantasy' and 'Ingenuity' clearly do not. However, although his judgement may have been impeccable his inclination seems to have been pleasantly wayward. For instance, *The Well-Beloved*, a novel of almost no interest whatever except as an imaginative scheme of one of the ways of love, was written after *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, after *The Woodlanders* and only very shortly before *Jude the Obscure*. Indeed, Hardy revised this oddest of his novels for publication in book form after the publication of *Jude*. The result of this uneven production is that critics are given an unfair stick to beat Hardy with. The vices they find in the minor novels can be unearthed, somehow or other, in the major novels. If the plot of *Desperate Remedies* creaks rather loudly then we can be forgiven for shaking our heads over the plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; if the style of *A Laodicean* is sometimes forced and precious, surely we can find these same faults in *The Return of the Native*. The unfairness of this reasoning is evident.

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Although we cannot dismiss the minor novels, then, we should pay greatest attention to the novels listed first by Hardy. Chapters 2 to 7 are each centred on one of the major Novels of Character and Environment and present them in chronological order. In each case some reference is made, where appropriate, to the other novels and to the poems. In chapter 8 I discuss the two most important of the Romances and Fantasies and the other minor fiction, and in chapter 9 the poetry, including *The Dynasts*.

The importance of Hardy's poetry has recently been recognized in various ways; among these I would point out a study of the poems and their influence by Donald Davie<sup>2</sup> and the twenty-seven Hardy poems that open Philip Larkin's new edition (1973) of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*. It must also be significant that in Helen Gardner's edition (1972) of the *New Oxford Book of English Verse* Hardy is given more space than any other poet save Shakespeare and Wordsworth. As with the novels, Hardy seemed able to write poems in both more and less successful styles throughout his life; but there is no doubt that, whether we take the bulky *Complete Poems* as a unified work or whether we confine ourselves to the 'anthology' pieces, Hardy is an important poet as well as an important novelist.

In the following table the numbers 1 to 4 give Hardy's own categories for his prose as it appears in the Wessex Edition of 1912. I have added the volumes of poetry to the list (item 5) and the date of publication of all the works mentioned (often different from the date of writing). In the right-hand column I give the abbreviations used to refer to the works in this book.

## HARDY'S WORKS

1	Novels of Character and Environment		
1	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	1891	TD
2	<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	1874	FFMC
3	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	1895	JO
4	<i>The Return of the Native</i>	1878	RN
5	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	1886	MC
6	<i>The Woodlanders</i>	1887	WL
7	<i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>	1872	UGT
8	<i>Life's Little Ironies</i> (stories)	1894	LLI
9	<i>Wessex Tales</i> (stories)	1888	WT

<sup>2</sup> *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

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2	Romances and Fantasies		
10	<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i>	1873	PBE
11	<i>The Trumpet-Major</i>	1880	TM
12	<i>Two on a Tower</i>	1882	TT
13	<i>The Well-Beloved</i>	1892 & 1897	WB
14	<i>A Group of Noble Dames</i> (stories)	1891	GND
3	Novels of Ingenuity		
15	<i>Desperate Remedies</i>	1871	DR
16	<i>The Hand of Ethelberta</i>	1876	HE
17	<i>A Laodicean</i>	1881	LA
4	Mixed Novels		
18	<i>A Changed Man</i> (stories)	1913	CM
5	Poetry		
1	<i>The Dynasts</i>	1903–8	DY
2	<i>Wessex Poems</i>	1898	
3	<i>Poems of the Past and the Present</i>	1901	
4	<i>Time's Laughingstocks</i>	1909	
5	<i>Satires of Circumstance</i>	1914	
6	<i>Moments of Vision</i>	1917	
7	<i>Late Lyrics and Earlier</i>	1922	
8	<i>Human Shows</i>	1925	
9	<i>Winter Words</i>	1928	

(Poetry nos. 2–9 above are all referred to as 'CP', i.e. *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson, Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975. This edition also contains Hardy's uncollected poems.)

All references to the fiction cite the *chapter* in question. This is designed to avoid confusion. Most of Hardy's chapters are short, and reference to page numbers is rendered impracticable by the large number of editions of his work, all of which have different pagination. The Wessex Edition is the 'authorized version' and it forms the basis of all good subsequent editions. Currently the standard edition is the New Wessex series published by Macmillan; the pagination of the New Wessex hardbacks differs from that of the paperbacks.<sup>3</sup>

Most details of the confusing publishing history of Hardy's fiction and poetry are to be found in R. L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A*

<sup>3</sup> Hardy's early novella *An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress* (1878), not included by Hardy in the Wessex Edition, is now available in an edition published by Hutchison (1976); see note 1, chapter 2 below.

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*Bibliographical Study* (O.U.P. revised edition, 1968). It is worth remembering that most of Hardy's fiction appeared first in serial form in periodical publications whose editors were even more cautious about offending their readers than were the publishers of novels in book form. Consequently we have various versions of some novels, representing not only Hardy's second thoughts as he corrected proofs but also the definitive book versions that superseded the serial version. We can be sure, however, that the standard editions we now use largely reflect Hardy's final preference.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> However, cf. R. C. Schweik, 'Thomas Hardy: Fifty Years of Textual Scholarship', in *Thomas Hardy after Fifty Years*, ed. L. St J. Butler. London: Macmillan, 1977.

## I

## ‘Life offers – to deny!’

The only honest answer to the question ‘What are Hardy’s novels and poems about?’ is that they are about love. There is a temptation to think that Hardy’s main concern is agricultural, provincial, sociological; that his work is about Wessex and the traditional ways of Wessex life. Raymond Williams, for instance, argues a sophisticated version of this case,<sup>1</sup> pointing out that although Hardy is not a peasant chronicler of peasant tales (there were no real *peasants* in nineteenth-century Dorset) we should see him ‘in his real identity: both the educated observer and the passionate participant in a period of general and radical change’. Now it is true that there is a tension in Hardy between the ‘educated’ voice and the Wessex dialect, and a tension between old ways and new methods, and a tension between the social classes; but these are images or examples of the fundamental tension – which is that between the possible and the actual. And this basic issue appeared to Hardy most forcibly not in social or economic life but in the realm of love.

Among all creatures man alone has a view of the possible; so only man observes how far short of the possible the actual falls; this is the curse of consciousness. All other beings live by one law – the law of nature, evolution, what Hardy calls the Immanent Will. Man lives by two laws – the law of nature and the law of his own desires and aspirations. But the law of nature does not stop short at the boundaries of something called the ‘natural world’: it runs for man and society as much as for ants and anthills, so the conflict between the two dispensations lies as much within man as between him and hostile external forces.

The causes of any event are unimaginably complex. When Gabriel Oak is ruined in the early stages of *Far from the Madding Crowd* because his sheep run over the cliff to their deaths, we have a perfect example of the natural law in operation. Gabriel’s desire is that the sheep should grow fat and healthy and improve his income. Nature decrees otherwise. But ‘decrees’ is the wrong word, because nature is quite impersonal, unconscious, unmalig. There is no malicious design against Gabriel, there are just the natural

<sup>1</sup> In *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Chatto and Windus. 1970.

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facts: the excitable dog, the weak fence, the proximity and height of the cliff. The Immanent Will is the energy that sustains the universe and is as much responsible for Gabriel's desire to succeed as a farmer as it is for the death of the sheep. But the Will is not God 'out there' controlling all things, aware of man's desires. It is definable only as the sum total of the energy involved in all events. Hardy's early sonnet 'Hap' (CP p. 9) helps to make clear how he saw the workings of the Will.

If but some vengeful god would call to me  
 From up the sky, and laugh: 'Thou suffering thing,  
 Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,  
 That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!'

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,  
 Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;  
 Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I  
 Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,  
 And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?  
 Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan . . . .  
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

This poem illustrates G. K. Chesterton's remark that Hardy combined a disbelief in God with a hatred of him for not existing.

It will be clear that on some occasions man's will coincides with the Immanent Will while on other occasions man may propose what he wants but the Will disposes that quite different things should come about. 'The all-enacting Might', we are told (in 'Let Me Enjoy'), 'That fashioned forth its loveliness/Had other aims than my delight' (CP p. 238). Surely man's strongest desires are good examples of the working of the Will; yet what thwarts them if not the Will itself? In 'Yell'ham Wood's Story' (CP p. 298) the final words of the mournful trees are 'Life offers - to deny!' The point is that the Will is quite unaware of man's aspirations, and in the face of that fact man's best choice is withdrawal, resignation, learning not to desire.

The importance of this disparity between the possible (the desired) and the actual (what the Will wills) varies according to the strength of the will or desire thwarted. 'I wanted brown bread but the baker had only white' is a trivial example. 'I had an aptitude as a scholar but society would not admit a stonemason to

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Oxford' is a considerably more important example. What is the highest and most important example we can give? Perhaps it should be my desire for salvation, for union with God. But God does not exist and I am already as united to the Immanent Will as it is possible to be; indeed, I *am* the Will in one of its aspects. What is man's highest, strongest desire, then? What is his greatest thwarting? Surely his experience of love, described in the Preface to *Jude the Obscure* as 'the strongest passion known to humanity'. Love, for Hardy, has an almost religious power. It is like Jove's thunderbolts; it can kill (Sue Bridehead's first Oxford boyfriend, for example; also see 'Her Dilemma' (CP p. 13)). It can also destroy (Boldwood), torture (Fanny Robin, Giles Winterborne) and elevate its objects to the highest level (Grace Melbury for Giles Winterborne, Clym Yeobright for Eustacia until she has married him, Angel Clare for Tess). It can even do a little marginal good to the lover himself; Gabriel Oak, Marty South and Diggory Venn are better for their loving.

Love, in Hardy, is essentially passionate love, but not always. As we shall see in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy also countenances the possibility of a love based on affection and on mutual involvement in a joint enterprise. Gabriel Oak is certainly passionately attached to Bathsheba, but his final union with her promises permanence and satisfaction precisely because it has more to it than passion or infatuation. We have only to think of the situation just before the storm, in chapter 36, to see this point. Troy is drunk, satisfied, careless; Boldwood is infatuated, suicidal, careless; Oak is working on the ricks beside Bathsheba, working because he cares. And he cares not merely about the woman (Boldwood does *that*) but about the corn too.

Being thwarted, particularly in love, is the stuff of all Hardy's work. In *The Dynasts* it is Napoleon's ambitions that the Will happens to work against. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Henchard suffers disappointment in love and also in business, in friendship and in the affection of his daughter. This novel is a fair example of how these thwartings and disappointments are brought about. The causes of action, I have said, are unimaginably complex, and among them must be numbered the protagonist's own doings. This operates at the fundamental level at which all action is an offering of hostages to Fortune: Oak only fails as a sheep farmer because he *tries to be* a sheep farmer. It also operates at the level familiar to us from the traditions of tragedy: Henchard has flaws in his character, he is impetuous, headstrong, overfond. We sow the seeds of our



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own disasters. But then we are as we are because of a long and many-stranded web of cause and effect constantly wrought by the Immanent Will. This largely determinist view of human action led Hardy to describe man's freedom as being like the freedom of the pianist's fingers to move. Analysis of this image will make it clear that it leaves nothing at all of human freedom; elsewhere Hardy suggested that we have freedom to change the course of events only when everything else is momentarily 'equal' or in balance.

The main area in which man struggles in his losing battle against the Will is that of love. I have rather discounted Hardy's economic, social and 'Wessex' concerns, but now they can be introduced in their rightful place. Love is a subject that necessarily brings with it all the other relationships and situations that make up the significant side of a man's life. Writing of love enables Hardy to analyse the world and the workings of the Will in the right light. It is precisely in the matter of love that such manifestations of the Will as law, money, class, trade and education have their maximum impact. Tess Darbeyfield's smattering of education (a circumstance brought about by vast socio-economic causes) makes her the best candidate for the visit to the supposed d'Urberville relations; perhaps it is enough, too, to tip the balance of Angel Clare's scruples about marrying a milkmaid. The question of divorce is dealt with in the stories of Jude and Sue, Grace and Giles, not in that these are parables, dressed-up abstractions for the purpose of putting Hardy's point of view on divorce, but in that they isolate the critical point in the great chain of causes and effects at which man's deepest needs come into inevitable conflict with the nature of things. Love, therefore, is not only man's most serious concern in the world (an assumption, I should say, that Hardy makes throughout his work, but one that can, of course, be questioned), it is also the perfect illustration of man's situation in the world. This latter point can hold good even if we question the former.

Love has built into it certain features typical of man's position that makes it the perfect illustration. If a man loves a woman there is no guarantee that the woman will love the man. How is man to resolve the conflict between his desire for a physical relationship and his desire for spiritual communion? If this question seems old-fashioned, I would plead, first, that this is the very real situation of Jude vis-à-vis Sue and Arabella and, second, that it is still with us today in the work of Samuel Beckett, to mention no others. Then again, how is it that when a lover is unavailable, he or she is loved wildly, but when he or she is fully possessed, our interest diminishes?

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These characteristics of love typify much in our lives, especially in this matter of things not living up to expectation. Who is ever as excited about something the tenth time it is encountered as the first time? As Hardy put it, 'Love thrives on proximity but dies on contact.' Man's loving conforms to the pattern laid down in Shakespeare's 129th sonnet – the sonnet on lust. Lust is

Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;  
 Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,  
 Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,  
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad.

Time and again Hardy's lovers are disappointed, but the disappointment of unrequited love, although painful, is in some ways less acute than the disillusionment of successful love. Eustacia Vye gets her much-desired Clym and finds life with him so tedious that she dies trying to escape with a former lover, Damon Wildeve, now become attractive again because he is barred to her. Fitzpiers soon tires of Grace Melbury, though not as quickly as Jude Fawley tires of Arabella. And always it is *too late*; the irrevocable step has been taken. Symbolic of all these lovers whose passion 'dies on contact' is Angel Clare, whose love is killed at a blow within hours of taking Tess for life. Clare is the archetype of this aspect of Hardy. He falls in love with Tess, who is his social inferior; after a considerable struggle he persuades himself that her purity and innocence make up for her social inferiority; she is beautiful and she is to be entirely and exclusively his. On their wedding night she confesses that she is not the virgin he has taken her for and he rejects her in an agony of mind that, even a permissive century later, we can still comprehend. Thus it is in the one vital area of innocence, in the very thing that conquers Clare's social scruples, that Tess proves to be deficient and he to have an uncontrollable aversion.

So the world goes; what we desired and got we desire no longer, what we still desire we cannot have. Bathsheba stirs Troy's emotions to the pitch of marrying her; they cool rapidly only to be awakened by the *dead* Fanny Robin, that is, by the girl he could have married when she was alive; he put a trifling point of pride before her when she could have been his (she was *too easy*) but now that she can never be his he declares total love for her. It seems that the fair 'maid from St Juliot' that Hardy himself married did not prove an exception to this law of love. He loved Emma Gifford in the days of their Cornish romance in the 1860s and again after her death in 1912, but the intervening years, the years of his actual possession