I

HARDY SEEMS NATURALLY AND CONTINUOUSLY PRESENT IN his poetry, even when it is in the form of a tale or spoken in an invented voice. It seems his normal mode of expression. In the novels, too, the voice could only be his own; yet there he gives the impression of a man who would rather be silent than speak. The man who watches and reflects does not seem quite the same man as the one who talks to us, but neither can he evade him. Often he seems to want to, and to want to disown the novels as products of a trade undertaken to earn a living; yet he is pinned down in them against his will.

He never got over his surprise, sometimes outrage, at what other people thought and said about them. A ruminative man might force himself into garrulity, when writing for a living, by assuming a *persona* outside himself, which he could leave in the grasp of the public, as a lizard leaves its tail. A Shakespeare, or a Dickens, could both do that in their own way; but Hardy's selfhood, like that of Keats, seems helplessly all of a piece. When George Moore mocked his style, in *Conversations in Ebury Street*, Hardy's resentment was fierce. He scribbled, but of course never published, an epitaph for Moore:

> Heap dustbins on him:
> They'll not meet
> The apex of his self-conceit.

Hardy was then an old man of almost legendary fame, his gentleness and serenity a byword. But his instinctive reaction was that of the young Keats to Byron's reported sneers. Deep down he can have been no more modest than any other great writer, but his knowledge of his own genius never assumed, even in his maturity, the usual form of confident indifference, or detachment.

This relation to his work and audience is unique to Hardy, and to our present relation with him. It means we may still respond today to the real pleasures of his text in ways quite different to those in which we are usually taken on by a novelist. For one thing his words may make us feel that the words of other novelists are much more settled in place, have the air of being dealt out for good. Hardy's words and sentences give the impression of continuing instability: while reading we are waiting for something unexpected, good or bad, to happen to them, and this kind of expectation is a characteristic part of the pleasure.

It is an attention that grows with re-reading. Going back to the Victorian novelists always brings rewards more or less complex. Thackeray almost alone, perhaps, never equals again the degree of pleasure the first reading gives us: he lacks further resources to follow up with. George Eliot and Dickens – Trollope too – have plenty; and they derive for the most part from our increased perception of the geometry of the work, and the way idiosyncrasy and subtlety contribute to the general perspective of meaning. Perceptions with Hardy are of a rather different sort. His text may come increasingly to strike us as an affair of collaterals, effects not isolated from but independent of each other, with a purpose and intentness of their own. The feel of its continuity may none the less seem to increase, as its larger issues and claims diminish, and as other kinds of satisfaction reveal themselves. This may sound like a description of weakness rather than strength; I shall try to show it is not.

Hardy observed once, interrogatively, that there was no technique – was there? – for writing prose. Like many of his remarks it is hard to know in what spirit to take this, but it seems likely he did feel it to be too ordinary a medium to be crafted like verses. He professed to be 'much struck' by Coventry Patmore's opinion that the beauties of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* could not have 'the immortality which would have been impressed upon them by the form of verse'. At the same time he was studying style, as he also tells us, from re-reading 'Addison, Macaulay, Newman, Sterne, Defoe, Lamb, Gibbon, Burke, *Times* Leaders, etc.', and concluding that 'the whole secret of a living style and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in

not having too much style'. 'Being a little careless, or rather seeming to be . . . brings wonderful life in to the writing'. 'This', he goes on, 'is of course simply a carrying into prose the knowledge I have learnt in poetry'.

The comments on style are extremely shrewd, but how the knowledge acquired in writing poetry could be carried into prose is not quite so simple a question as Hardy is inclined to make out. The characteristics of his poetry depend on formal patterns and frames of versification. The syntax and paragraphing in the novels, particularly the early ones, give the impression of missing these things, and unwillingly possessing, in consequence, a freedom in which they are far from easy. He can find no safety in style: exposition is also a kind of exposure. And yet his prose words do none the less seem to have a space round them, like the words in poetry, though in the prose medium it makes them often seem awkward and vulnerable in their arrangement. It is hard to believe this is really intentional, even though Hardy may deliberately have let himself be 'remiss' at times, as Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* tells us he found it convenient to be. But though his verses may be flat with equanimity, they are never remiss in this sense – they are always taut and exact. In their freedom from this kind of poetic concentration his words in prose seem quite unregarding of themselves, and unchosen, even as they appear to retain the separateness and distinction of language in poetry.

This remains so no matter how many facts and details they may be conveying – for Charles Reade's example led the aspiring author to copy Defoe also in providing factual information – and in the midst of all their labours of observation or sententiousness the sentences remain plain and open. Meredith's prose is much more obviously that of a poet than Hardy's, which is what makes it so difficult to read. Its energy of insight and self-enjoyment, its profusion of 'good things', is decidedly fatiguing; even though it is only fair to say such a late novel as *One of Our Conquerors* is easier as well as more rewarding on second or subsequent occasions, when we have learnt to keep out some of its glitter with mental dark glasses.

Although every Hardy text is far more effectually *aesthetic* than anything of theirs – he is in a sense the most aesthetic of all

English novelists – it is none the less instructive to compare him with other novelists who write with their own kinds of clumsiness or carelessness, real or assumed – novelists such as Dreiser, Faulkner, or John Cowper Powys. Faulkner, in particular, seems held by the way he writes, enclosed in it like a refuge, as if the blankness and size and dilution of America called for such a style in order to preserve the novelist against them. Powys is often said to have affinities with Hardy, in scope and 'power' being a sort of cosmic optimist to Hardy's pessimist: those different pretensions to scope and power do not make him at all resemble Hardy, except in one respect. He too disconcerts judicious criticism, irritates its purists, and threatens their criteria. With his boisterous, cliché-ridden style, his seemingly naïve and facile absorptions, he *ought* to be bad – but is he? However different Hardy's case may be, he was certainly treated, by James and Stevenson and others, with the same sort of dismissal or reservation which those who are quite out of sympathy with his world apply to Powys. Nor, in the case of Hardy's novels, is such a dismissal itself unheard of, even today.

In reading Hardy, as in reading Powys, there are kinds of disappointment which do not seem to matter. But not for the same reasons. With Powys, as with Faulkner, or with Lawrence himself, *totality* of style soon declares itself. The positiveness of the text soon takes on predictability, becoming a completely homogeneous and recognisable medium into which we slip, so that as we attend to what they are saying and narrating we cease to notice the medium and its emphases. Such a habituation on the reader's part shows there is nothing unstable in the text, as there is in Hardy's. Disappointment, if it comes, is thus a complete thing: a boredom with, or alienation from, the text. In Hardy, disappointment is a reaction much more intimate and intermingled, which may turn out to present itself as an actual asset, a greater clarity in the experience of the pleasure. This relates to Hardy's seeming lack of desire to speak. Sometimes his voice appears to trail away; sometimes to reproduce small talk mechanically, like a shy man at a dinner-table. There is then a kind of lukewarmness in the text itself, which is very typical: one can become addicted to it.

This hesitancy, passivity, a lack of rigour behind the

maintaining of literary appearances, must have been detected by Henry James and contributed to his irritation. Compare his own masterly handling of the father's reactions to an unsuitable suitor in *Washington Square* with the similar situation in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Hardy seems to get no grip on the dramatic point of the thing. When the rector, Elfride's father, discovers her lover's identity, he seems – like his author – uncertain how the part should be played. His previous jokes and anecdotes, and now his indignation, appear perfunctory and random: the plot is left waiting for relevance to put its shoulder to the wheel. Hardy is apparently not interested in hitting off the *idea* of a disapproving parent, but only in noting the inadequate reactions of a specimen he has observed and imagined. His lack of drive puts a space of inept actuality round the incident, and in that space the reader is left both flat and attentive, much more involved in what is going on, and in the atmosphere of the text, than it seems at the time concerned to justify.

James's Dr Sloper consummately realises his author's conception, and plays the part for which he is planned. James cannot afford to let him keep any of the uncertainties of the anecdote, recorded in his *Notebooks*, on which he is based. And in omitting it from the revised edition of his works, nearly thirty years after it was written, James may have been acknowledging the preponderance of the theatrical in this superb *nouvelle*, at a time when he had become concerned with more ingenious techniques of naturalism, with finding the 'key that fits the complicated chambers of *both* the narrative and the dramatic lock'. The way they treat a similar theme, at this early stage of their development, is the more significant in that both Hardy and James are aiming at something popular, at a story of love and suspense. Certainly the first requirement of *Washington Square*, from which all its other rigidities proceed, is that Catherine Sloper must 'love' her suitor in a conveniently absolute sense: and this correlates exactly to the rigour with which James handles the story. Elfride in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* has, conversely, no proper sense of 'love', even though her situation demands it; and this, like the inconsequentiality of her father, seems the natural ally of Hardy's own lack of grip.

His is a vulnerability which makes us engrossed at the same

time that we feel the sense of disappointment; or the two reactions can succeed one another. Our satisfaction in the text can increase as we read, to the point that we know we are in a master's hands; then, quite abruptly, it may fall off and subside. This disappointment is not like feeling – as we might in a novel of Dickens, or with a Browning monologue – that the narrative has gone off the boil, and is reproducing itself for a slack time with mechanical facility. Hardy never falls back on being Hardy, as Dickens does on the Dickensian manner, or Thackeray on being Thackerayan. He has nothing in this sense to fall back on. Nor is there any question of a cover-up, such as even the unpretending skill of Jane Austen resorts to – still less the rare signs in George Eliot of a failure in her intention, showing themselves through a methodical accumulation of analysis.

No; 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. His conformities are themselves an aspect of his literary solitude, and they make him appear, at unguarded moments, more peculiarly himself. For in and before Hardy's time the novelist was expected to be very much a man in society, able to say what he wanted, and in the way he wanted, provided he kept up appearances. Hardy kept them; whatever his protests to the contrary the conventions of the time suited him very well. They gave him his chance to be private, even when he seems most concerned to play his part, as it were, in the animation of the salon.

Hardy's position here, its air at once awkward and natural, as if the text really were a man in a formal social situation, marks him off from any novelist today. From contemporaries and predecessors too, no doubt, but the contrast with our time has the more revealing emphasis. It looks almost preposterous, indeed, if we take the hint offered to us in a well-known contemporary novel*, ingeniously constructed to hold the reader's interest, deliberately taking a Hardy-style plot, set in his country, and in the year 1867, when Hardy returned to Dorset, and to some conjectured amorous complication, after his formative five

* John Fowles: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

years in London. The novel refers to him frequently, and Mr Fowles is even franker about Hardy's influence in an essay he has given us on the way his own novels are composed. He feared this novel might be labelled as 'a clumsy pastiche of Hardy':

> The shadow of Thomas Hardy, the heart of whose 'country' I can see in the distance from my workroom window, I cannot avoid . . . I don't mind the shadow . . . It is somehow encouraging that while my fictitious characters weave their own story in their 1867, only thirty miles away in the real 1867 the pale young architect was entering his own fatal life-incident.*

The central episode of his novel is clearly inspired by what he calls Hardy's 'own mysterious personal life'. He identifies himself with the earlier writer by imagining a woman, as Hardy so often does. A woman stands gazing out to sea, as in a Hardy poem. Who is she? What does she want? Yet it is not event and narration that Mr Fowles's novel offers us, but a shadow image of the author's own vision. His woman is an 'idea' to herself, as she is to him. And a passage early on in the novel explains why:

> The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and voice of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the world of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes.
>
> We . . . know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live.
>
> The novelist is still a God . . . What has changed is that we are no longer the Gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority.
>
> I have disgracefully broken the illusion? No. My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more real than the one I have just broken . . . I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid.

* 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', from *Afterwards*, New York, 1969.

Some readers will accept these comments merely as their author's affidavit that he is abreast of the changing fashions of his craft; whole others, fresher to the business, may feel stimulated by what seems incisive proof of our superior modern awareness in these matters. Like the Victorians we want to be pleased with our progressive selves, and the novelist who tells us he has assumed the 'vocabulary and voice' of 1867 cleverly combines these with the enlightenment of the modern novel to show just how pleased with ourselves we are, as it may be he is too.

This novelist is very sure of himself, where Hardy is not, and this sets a very wide space between them. He is as far from Hardy as Meredith was in Hardy's own time, or as Fielding and Sterne and Diderot were a hundred years earlier. All, in their fashion, made a point of abdicating from the conventional responsibilities of the writer in the salon, into the freedom of being their own confident and enterprising selves. Hardy does the opposite. He takes refuge in the division of roles the age offered – the private, the literary, the social – like a deer in the thickets. Of all novelists he owes most to a society which, whatever it exacted in the way of conformity, licensed its members to protect and compartmentalise their lives; while at the same time it extended the maximum credulity to the authenticity of their creations.

The two are certainly connected; and that is why Hardy can use the structure of Victorian society itself as a kind of inner support for his imagination: when he is saying the Emperor has no clothes he is also clinging to the Imperial coat-tails.By using every amenity which a rigid society mutely offers, even as its precepts loudly admonish, he becomes more subtle in his openness than the novelist who can claim to throw all that sort of thing away when he begins to talk to us: much more so than the novelist of today who can fashion every hypothesis and indulge every fantasy, unhampered by the need to sustain illusion. Aided by his native literalness Hardy takes up the cause of illusion far more seriously than do Thackeray or Trollope. Illusion is sustained most potently in his novels by his apparent reluctance to speak – the crafty story-teller knows that such a reticent sobriety is the best index of the truth he is telling – while they scatter it to the winds by their fluency.

Hardy's attitude to *consciousness* is totally, even disconcertingly, *modern*. Only his attitude to society is of its time. This fact alone makes nonsense of most of Mr Fowles's assumptions. And I bring up his novel because its merits serve to show with singular clarity why the air of freedom in a Hardy story is so much stronger than in his own, despite the new kind of claims that he makes. That freedom in Hardy depends on a relation to society which is intimately connected with the illusion he is creating as a novelist. As a writer Mr Fowles has no relation to society at all: he merely gives it his views, which include an assurance that the stories he tells it are untrue. The conventions of the Victorian novel may have been as untenable as its society's conception of God, but its illusory characters appear more solid than those who are programmed by the modern novelist to run free and to 'disobey' him. The freedom which Mr Fowles announces as his first principle may seem to resemble that of a man on a desert island, for whom everything perceived returns only the echo of his own consciousness. His audience, as well as his characters, find themselves marooned with him. And however free and alone, he is far less interesting than Hardy in company.

Since ambiguity depends upon illusion, the alternatives that Mr Fowles offers his characters suggest less to the reader's imagination than the determined fates which Hardy and his contemporaries contrive for theirs. Hardy's relation to God or to gods was certainly idiosyncratic, but less than any novelist, past or present, did he desire to make his own rules and announce his own tables of the Law. Like his Giles Winterborne, he is by nature, as a novelist, 'one of those silent unobtrusive beings' who 'scrutinise others' behaviour' the more closely in consequence, but whose independence makes no claim to being a law unto itself. It is significant that Winterborne is deeply disturbed, shocked almost, at the idea that Grace's marriage might be dissolved, although this means he may yet win her hand:

> Surely the adamantine barrier of marriage could not be pierced like this! It did violence to custom.

Winterborne, like his creator, has a sound idea of what barriers

are best decreed in the novel; and for his art to seem real Hardy needed their adamantine reassurance, alike in his writing and his plotting, invention and imagination.

Hardy's vulnerability, and the measures he takes against it, prevent him from ever seeming facile. They impede fluency, as they do any other open indulgence, like that easy relation with their readers, over the head of the novel as it were, which is claimed by Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot, and which Mr Fowles has sought to imitate for his own purposes and as a foil for the new conventions he employs. A sufficiently hearty fluency is of course the natural enemy of illusion, patronising as it does the novel's need for it. 'What I object to about the mid-Victorians', observed Virginia Woolf in a letter, 'is their instinctive fluency'. She wanted to restore illusion to the novel, illusion of her own kind, that of the feel of life itself.

In this she saw Hardy as a shadowy kind of ally, or at least precursor. She understood and felt at home with him – one of his poems is quoted in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* – and she cultivated intensively the kind of helplessness which is immanent in his style. Fluency, the sign of the power and confidence of the Victorians, their ability to take artifice in their stride, oppressed her; she had to escape from it. Hardy had also escaped, in his novels, by his own more private and unobtrusive methods. The library audience that first responded to him must have felt this as some sort of relief, after the extrovert power of the big novelists. T. S. Eliot thought that the modern poet must 'dislocate language', if necessary, into his meaning. And this development, which Yvor Winters chided Eliot for advocating, calling it 'the fallacy of expressive or imitative form', was pursued by Virginia Woolf, by Joyce, by Hemingway, until it became a commonplace of the modern manner.

In Hardy's text it is already implicit, as we shall see, though it does not seem conscious, and it is certainly not pursued with method and concentration. But when his characters bumble, his text bumbles too; he does not in the least mind falling flat, if there is no occasion for rising, and in life as he saw it there seldom is. The quality of disappointment we taste in our experience of his text may seem to be a formalisation of disappointment as a bulky ingredient in life – certainly in life as