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THOMAS HARDY

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The quiet and unassuming old author of the Wessex novels has long lived in comparative seclusion in his native county of Dorset. The world knows little about him except that he is a pessimistic man of letters. Journalists have not penetrated the sanctum and discovered his characteristic habits. And even from his work it is difficult to reconstruct his personality; for he has cultivated the French aloofness in his art.

Nor is his philosophy more apparent. The fresh reader of Hardy is not aware of any doctrine; he only feels a queerness, a strange tightening about the heart. He knows this is not like life; but he reads on and on, and finds nothing unnatural. He finally arrives at the impressive conclusion that the life in the Wessex novels is a blind alley, that extinction would be better. Yet he has never felt that real life is like life in the

Wessex novels, —and yet, again, how do they differ?

Thomas Hardy, in his greatest novels, completely translated his philosophy into terms of art; and thus he deluded the reader. Hardy was not, himself, strenuously active as a philosopher; he accepted a philosophy, absorbed it, and then turned it to artistic purpose. And this philosophy was positivism. The queerness of his novels is the very queerness of life as conceived by positivism.

He is temperamentally congenial to the scientific attitude and method; he delights in the cold, clear, relentless precision of the impartial seeker after truth. He refuses to hug any vision; the bitterness, the brutality of facts is preferable.

Armed with the axioms of positivism, Thomas Hardy set out to interpret life. And as he limited himself in his spiritual outlook, so he chose to limit himself geographically to the county of Dorset, renamed in his novels "Wessex". "It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world, where may usually be found more meditation than action and more passivity than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow

premises and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, no less than in other places, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein". It is these Sophoclean dramas of the sinister county of Egdon Heath that Thomas Hardy has given to the world in the greatest of his series of Wessex novels.

He is, then, a great artist. He is, in fact, fundamentally a poet, no matter how influential his scientific bent may have been on his method and ideas. The deceptively intellectual manner of his style and construction are at the service of poetic feeling and conception. This duality of the scientific and the poetic goes far to explain the work of Hardy. He perhaps never completely reconciled them; they break out into open war in his later novels. But it is just in so far as the poetic and human has triumphed over his positivism that Hardy will be read in after times.

1.

Thomas Hardy was born in Dorsetshire, June 2, 1840. Besides education in the local schools, he had private tuition in Latin and French. His father wished him to enter the ministry, but for some reason or other he was articulated to an ecclesiastical architect when sixteen years old. While he was learning architecture he privately read Latin and Greek with a fellow pupil. He was also commissioned to travel about and sketch and measure old country churches, and during these tours he acquired an intimate topographical knowledge of the country, besides a wide experience of the people and their customs. From 1862 to 1867 he lived in London, working at Gothic architecture under Sir A. Blomfield, A.R.A. In 1863 he was prizeman of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and became the same year a member of the Architectural Association.

During his residence in London, Hardy was assiduously writing verse, although he published none of it. In 1865 he published a humorous sketch, entitled "How I Built Myself a House", in Chambers' Journal. His first novel, "The Poor Man and the Lady", was submitted to George Meredith in 1867. It was unripe and revolutionarily extravagant, although it contained some things of promise. Meredith advised the author to reconsider it, and it was never published. In 1870 Hardy presented "desperate Remedies", which was still extravagant and morbid, but was very promising. Meredith accepted it, but recommended a lighter tone. The result the next year was "Under the Greenwood Tree", a charming idyllic story in which Hardy came into his own in delicacy of execution, in nature treatment, and in humorous delineation of rustics. "A Pair of Blue Eyes" followed in 1873, the first in the series of Wessex tragedies. It is also memorable for the portrayal of Elfrida Swancourt, one of the most famous of Hardy's famous feminine creations. Yet up to this time he had remained comparatively unknown. It was first in

1874, with the anonymous publication of "Far From the Madding Crowd", that Hardy became popular. This novel ran serially in the Cornhill Magazine at a time when every contributor to the Cornhill was accounted a genius or was expected to become one. The rumor immediately spread that George Eliot had written "Far From the Madding Crowd", because no one else was considered capable of writing it. When the authorship was announced in December the same year, Hardy found himself immediately famous.

Although this novel is the most balanced exhibition of the author's powers which he has ever given us, the critics at the time failed to appreciate the peasants with their odd humor and advised Hardy to leave the stupid rustics and draw the cleverness of the sophisticated. He responded with the farcical "Hand of Ethelberta", which, though unreal and fantastic, is yet pleasurable reading because of its masterly execution. However, in the words of Gosse, "it was the critics themselves who were standing on their heads. Mr. Hardy, always

humble and docile in spirit, stood for once on his head beside them, to please them, but fortunately he did not like it, and he never tried it again".*

In "The Return of the Native" (1877) he was again himself, picturing a tremendous tragedy against the sombre background of Egdon Heath. "The Trumpet Major", a slighter and less tragic work, deals with the period of Buonaparte and his threatened invasion of England, a period which had for Hardy a peculiar fascination which resulted in the later drama, "The Dynasts". During a period of illness he wrote that indifferent book, "A Laodicean". "Two on a Tower" (1882) shows Hardy's resourcefulness in bringing out all its possibilities and creating the illusion of reality even while dealing with an unconvincing situation. In the two books, "The Mayor of Casterbridge" and "The Woodlanders", he deals again in high tragedy, and with even a more steady and relentless a hand than in his earlier tragedies. Three Collections of short stories, "Wessex Tales"; "A Group of Noble Dames", and "Life's Little Ironies", show his mastery

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*In article on "The Historic Place of Mr. Meredith and Mr. Hardy", International Review, Vol. 4.

of that form of fiction, although they are novelettes rather than short stories after the manner of Kipling and Maupassant. The last three novels, "The Well-Beloved", "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", and "Jude the Obscure", much condemned and much praised, are in a class by themselves, representing a stage of development in his spiritual history.

Up to the publication of "Tess" there was no fundamental shifting of position by Thomas Hardy, either in thought or in method. He never was a self-searching philosopher, ruminating on his own experience, seeking its meaning. Nor did he experiment with the language or with art forms, or present any new theories of art. He seems to have settled a few fundamentals in the philosophies of life and art before he began writing; and having absorbed them into his personality, he watched life and wrote his impressions. "A novel", he wrote in the preface to the fifth edition of "Tess", "is an impression, not an argument".

2.

Hardy is a born man of the country. He seems in his novels to be continually condemning urban civilization; his dangerous sensualists have all had a taste of elegance and luxury, while the men and women whom he tends to exalt have all learned stoicism and constancy from close communion with the sternness of nature. But Hardy is artist is artist first and moralist almost not at all. His love of the country is a love of its poetry, of its sympathetic response to his own soul.

That Hardy delights in Wessex it is easy to see; and he delights in it not in the sentimental manner of the townsman, with a self-conscious delight. To the true-born man of the country, nature is so naturally poetic that he is unaware of its poetry and thinks he has a purely utilitarian interest in it.

Hardy never draws nature as passive; he does

not give us framed landscapes in the intervals of rest from narration. The setting in such books as "The Woodlanders" and "The Return of the Native" is active; it dominates the characters and the action; the line between the animate and the inanimate is blurred; men and women appear as mere emanations from the surface of Mother Earth, to which they ultimately again return. It is the very illusion of positivism, induced by artistic methods.

And with what delight he dwells on the old traditions and customs of his country! Even his bitter-sweet pride in grim Egdon Heath is enhanced by the reflection that perhaps it was the place where that old Wessex king, Lear, went mad in his affliction. Traditions from the time when "Boney" was expected to make an invasion into England somewhere along the coast-line, enter often into his books and served as the main inspiration for "The Trumpet Major". Roman theatres and roads and graves are among the other ancient relics of Wessex which have been appropriately introduced into his narratives. And what with his skimmity-rides, and Christmas mummers, and church

orchestras, and various other customs fast dying out, if not already dead, Wessex becomes decidedly picturesque. And yet all this local color is not introduced as a diversion. Hardy uses it because of an artistic sincerity and earnestness which makes him see the significance, the human value, of the trivial. The simple and the commonplace becomes in the Wessex novels stately, almost epic.

It would indeed hardly be amiss to call them an "epic of Wessex life". Farmers, artisans, shepherds, dairy-maids, clergymen, women of all classes, business men, peasants, and kings, are all discovered with their distinctive class characteristics. And their interrelations form a network, not only in two dimensions, but extending back into the past. For Wessex has a history; the forefathers of these men and women have, from time immemorial, lived and suffered and rejoiced and died on this small area of land. Wessex is mellow with humanity; sometimes, we fear, mellow to decay.

Next to his interpretation of nature, however, Hardy's greatest triumph in these pictures of Wessex is

his peasantry. Critics with one voice call these wonderful creations "Shakespearean". They are of the genealogy of Shallow.

"I was sitting at home", said Joseph Poorgrass, "looking for Ephesians, and says I to myself, 'Tis nothing but Corinthians and Thessalonians in this danged Testament'."

Olly, the besom-maker in "The Return of the Native", was discoursing on the remarkable progress of education: "The class of folk that couldn't use to make a round O to save their bones from the pit can write their names now without a sputter of the pen, oftentimes without a single blot: what do I say?— why, almost without a desk to lean their stomachs and elbows upon'.

'True: 'tis amazing what a polish the world have been brought to', said Humphry".

Such humorous bits of conversation as these, which dot Hardy's work, have required unusually quick sympathies and delicate handling. Their models were no doubt very dull people to the uninspired observer. Yet

the humor of Hardy has never had the softness which gives humor a kinship with the pathetic. It is the humor of a broad mind relishing another's narrowness. It has a tendency to pass into the grotesque, which is the deepest spiritual revelation Hardy has attained to. These ignorant peasants are but a phase of that moral duplicity which, he maintains, is fundamental in the universe and makes the continued existence therein but "a general drama of pain".

3.

There is no poetic justice in Thomas Hardy.

"Humanity never attains. In the morning of life we dress as for a feasts. But it^{va} perpetual postponement. In the evening we sup on the memory of what might have been. We are stripped of our last few rags and prepared for the tomb!*" Men desire, but do not attain. Therefore they are doomed to misery, and when they become aware of the hopelessness of the situation there will come a "universal desire not to live".

This is the pessimism of Hardy, and it is a superb pessimism for an artist to have, capable of inspiring massive tragedies. It demands, however, more than artistic appreciation; it challenges us as a philosophy. It demands that we recognize the futility of our own and everybody's existence. Its logical result is the mandate that mankind must commit suicide. As its

*"Hardy's Women", Bookman Vol.16.

appeal for proof is to the concrete facts of life, it must be tested by an appeal to real life.

In the first place, let us test his treatment of love. For a man's attitude towards woman is a measure of his spiritual worth; it reveals his inmost nature.

But love is not only a measure; it is a power. It has strengthened the weakest and ruined the strongest; it has made and unmade the philosophies and religions of the most thoughtful of men. Love is complex, with power of degradation or uplift, according to its character.

Hardy, too, considers love of the greatest importance in fashioning the motives of mankind, and has so dealt with it in his novels. But he justifies the emphasis with these words: "Life being a physiological fact, its honest portrayal must be largely concerned with, for one thing, the relations of the sexes, and the substitution for such catastrophes as favour the false coloring best expressed by the regulation finish that 'they married and were happy ever after', of catastrophes based upon sexual relationships as it is".^x

^x"Candour in English Fiction", Thomas Hardy.
New Review, Vol.2.

"Life being a physiological fact", all of Hardy's women are drawn with special emphasis upon the soul states which are explicable by reference to physiology. Instinct and impulse rule supreme in both men and women, and reason has little control over them, its function being helpless meditation. Among the instincts, those receive especial stress which have biological significance. And thus we get the Hardy women, who, in the words of Barrie,^x "think marriage a terrible thing to contemplate, engagements^N not quite so fearful, and arrangements to get engaged comparatively safe". They are coquettes, who insist on playing with the hearts of men, indulging in that game for its own sake, and str~~o~~wing wrecks along their path. This is woman's own contribution to the travailing of creation.

They are not immoral, however. They are so instinctive, so primitive, that the categories of ethics are inapplicable to them. They have not yet attained to the knowledge of good and evil. Nor do they fall an easy prey to the seducer; for they have an instinctive

^xContemporary Review, Vol.56.

modesty. And they are withal charming! They fascinate, they lure man. Hardy has been called a masculine novelist. As for women, they are disgusted with his representation of them, and hate him furiously.

No doubt these pictures seem realistic; these women appear thoroughly human, though tantalizingly fickle; no doubt there will be tenderness and sweetness in the love with which they are loved. But out of the complexities of the first tender esthetic idealism may spring the brutal love of the Orient, or such more spiritual love as the Teutonic ideal of the family. The young loves in the Wessex novels all tend towards the Oriental type of love. There is a coarseness and flippancy even in his best women which betrays the direction of their spiritual growth or change.

No doubt such types exist; no doubt impulse plays a large part in human life. But Hardy has evidently comprehended no other type. Neither has he given married life any prominence in his novels, for love results speedily in disillusion. There is a simpleness, a lack of

richness and spirituality, about this Hardy-esque
love that makes it unsafe to generalize from it. What
really ails it will appear as one approaches the problem
of evil as conceived by Thomas Hardy.

In this Physiological life two types of men and two of women are produced. The men are inclined, especially when under the influence of luxury and refinement, to become sensualists, enjoying themselves at the expense of others, without forethought or afterthought. They float along carelessly on the stream of passing events, seizing pleasure here and there, and of heavy heart only when there is no pleasure to seize. In the Hardy-esque tangle these men blight the lives of the steadfast women. The women who correspond to these men are the light-hearted coquettes, such as Bathsheba Everdene. Hardy does not condemn these, for he never sits in judgment upon his characters; he regards them only as one of a variety of types put forth by a diabolical universe, and so combined as to make this the worst possible of worlds.

Trouble, disaster, disappointment, however, produced a contrasting type, of which the men, Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterborne, and Clym Yeobright, and the women, Tess and Marty South, are representative. The great lesson which these have learned is stoicism; they are chastened by hardship into a patient and uncomplaining endurance of the ills of life. They even become more constant in love, although the philosophy of Hardy can give this constancy no essential value. It only renders them incapable of flitting from place to place and enjoying themselves. Yet he evidently admires these strong men and women; and they are certainly far more wholesome than the characters of the contrasting type, inasmuch as they have dropped that flippancy which suggests devilishness.

All these men and women of the Wessex novels are pagan; they have no knowledge of good and evil, but only of happiness and sorrow. Perhaps they occasionally use the words "good" and "bad", but the usage sounds strange; it seems an anachronism. What have these people to do with good and evil? They are not in search ^{of} for their

own salvation; they do not appreciate the value of character development. Character has for Hardy primarily, and almost exclusively, an artistic value. But the typical Hardy-esque man or woman is out to get what he or she has reason to expect: the satisfaction of desires created by nature. But these desires are a joke on the part of nature; for "cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society"^x. The paths of love, for instance, are by a clever arrangement of the gods made rough and tortuous, so that happiness is well-nigh impossible; love itself is a delusion.

Since Hardy sympathises so strongly with mankind in its bewilderment and sorrow, he turns fiercely against the gods. He continually illustrates the "irony of circumstance". There is no meaning in life; ideals cannot be trusted, for experience immediately reveals the "scorn of Nature for man's finer emotions, and her lack of interest in his aspirations"^x. The universe is morally grotesque.

This is certainly a high kind of pessimism;

^x "Jude the Obscure", p.377.

^x Ditto, p.208.

it is not derived from shattered nerves or a sick disposition. It has a wide sweep of philosophizing, a noble seriousness, that harks back to the Greek tragedians; it sympathises with men, and pities them for their unfortunate existence. But it is too exclusively a philosophy of pity. Mere pity, long continued, degrades both parties. There are possibilities in sympathy besides the mere "feeling with" another; we are in another world when we think of the phrase "the brotherhood of man", - a magical phrase, containing an unfailing power of soul restoration. The secret of this power lies in its recognition of the dynamic in our spirits. From the point of view of psychology, Hardy has made the mistake of drawing life only as feeling, as purely passive; consciousness is a tabula rasa which receives impressions from the external world, and feels them, but is incapable of any activity to direct and save itself. Neither Hardy nor any of his characters have any interest in spiritual integrity or in spiritual power. They do not transcend receptivity, and therefore their only hope of salvation is extinction.

After Hardy had been for twenty years depicting the tragedy born of the duplicity of the gods, he turned in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" to the portrayal of the cruelty of man. Convention, he says, intensifies the cruelty of nature; hence we should rid ourselves of convention. The result was that he tended to become polemical at the expense of his art; and the critics have pounced upon these last works, especially "Jude the Obscure", and condemned them as decadent, extravagant, morbid, with numerous other epithets which are of the stock vocabulary of latter-day conservative critics.

It may be gathered from this that these books deal daringly with rather dangerous situations; such books are red cloth to the critics. But the startling thing about these two novels - a thing which the critics overlooked in the haste of their indignation - is their

appeal to mankind to better their own condition, an appeal which involves a truly significant change from Hardy's earlier fatalistic position. There is a warm, passionate love for humanity in "Tess" which is found all too seldom in Hardy; he pleads almost in tears that mankind give poor Tess a little "loving-kindness". He implies repeatedly that the right person might have saved her from her unhappiness: for instance, if she had only dared to call on Angel Clare's father, Hardy is certain that all her troubles would have been smoothed over; but she did not, because she was afraid of the hard heart of man.

"My pessimism", he said in a conversation reported by William Archer^X, "my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs, and that Ahriman is winning all along the line. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but one plea against 'man's inhumanity to man' - to women - and to the lower animals? . . . Whatever may be the inherent good

^XCritic, Vol. 38.

or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be. When we have got rid of a thousand remediable ills, it will be time enough to determine whether the ill that is irremediable outweighs the good".

What are the remediable ills? Conventional morality includes them all. Hardy is much misinterpreted by some who wish him well. Thus one writes^x that the man Hardy, who is deeper than his philosophy, "I certainly call not a pessimist but an optimist, for he shows a worthy humanity, true to itself, unconquered by destiny, sanctified by love". Perhaps he is open to such an interpretation. But he certainly is not aware that his characters are "unconquered by destiny, sanctified by love"; it is his contention that the tragedy of life consists in, nay the meaning goes out of life because of, the fact that his characters are unsatisfied by destiny, unappeased by love. What in the world else, he would ask, can life mean but that we should have those satisfactions which we are made to crave?

^xE.S.Bates, in International Journal of Ethics, and quoted in Current Literature, Vol.39.

The sub-title which denominates Tess a pure woman is therefore misleading to both friends and enemies of Hardy. In this tragedy of the "dust and ashes of things, the cruelty of lust, and the fragility of love", Hardy maintains that Tess remained natural; "but for the world's opinion", he says of her experiences, they "would have been simply a liberal education". He has made a concession in the sub-title which he really cannot consistently make: that there is a test of purity and impurity; when he ought to be maintaining that the only test is whether or not she has ruined her chances of happiness. Hardy, in fact, is not a consistent and penetrating thinker; and one is tempted to suspect that in his own mind there was a confusion of the conventional and the ~~Hardy~~Hardy-esque morality when he wrote the word "pure". As he says of Angel Clare, "with all his attempted independence of judgment, this advanced man was yet a slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings".

"Jude the Obscure" is the history of a man

who was prevented by his passions from attaining a position in the church, a yearning after which was "his form of the modern vice of unrest". He asks himself why woman should thus stand in his way; "is it that the women are to blame; or is it the artificial system of things, under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springes to noose and hold back those who want to progress?" He makes experiments in matrimony, and the moral of the whole tale seems to be that it is "as culpable to bind yourself to love always as to believe a creed always, and as silly as to vow always to like a particular food or drink!"

In "The Well-Beloved" the transitory nature of love is completely explained and all its glory taken from it. A man at twenty falls in love with a girl of his own age; at forty he falls in love with her daughter; at the maturity of sixty he falls in love with her granddaughter. And all the while he loves not the real woman but an ideal which seems to flit about from woman to woman, yet remains ever the same; hence the

folly of idealistic love. He finds that the women have the same story to tell. One informs him that he is one of a long list of well-beloveds in which her affections have centred. She was not rationally seeking her affinity, either; "she was doing it quite involuntarily, by sheer necessity of her organism, puzzled all the while at her own instinct".

Whether it was the abuse of the critics, "sworn discouragers of effort", heaped upon these late novels, or by natural inclination, is not known; but Hardy relinquished fiction for his old mistress, verse. He has confessed^x that he took to fiction as a bread-winner, his highest aspirations having been all the time towards poetry.

^xIn a conversation with George Norton Morthrop.

"To a masterpiece in story there appertains a beauty of shape, no less than to a masterpiece in pictorial and plastic art, capable of giving to the trained mind an equal pleasure"^X. This beauty of shape, which has been cultivated by few English novelists, is one of the great characteristics which distinguish and unify the Wessex novels. Whether his early training in architecture has stood him in good stead or not, it is difficult to say, as we have no intimate biography or record of his development. But his plots are all carefully builded; sometimes even, with Ibsen, erring in making the architectonics too apparent. But as a rule this structural quality gives them a massiveness, an emotional power almost Aeschylean.

Although he appears to be the most impartial painter of reality, absolutely keeping himself aloof

^XThe Forum, March 1888, The Profitable Reading of Fiction, by Thomas Hardy.

from the narration, he is intensely subjective. "A novel is an impression". He confesses that in a novel, even "the characters, however they may differ, express mainly the author, his largeness of heart or otherwise, his culture, his insight, and very little of any other living person..."^x

Hardy works out the details of his narration with great patience. Apparently his one aim is scientific exactness, sometimes giving the impression of pedantry, even, as he unrolls his cold Latin vocabulary. Yet the effect of it all is an intense emotion. He attains the end of poetry with a style of almost mathematical precision; his rigid prose is made, somehow, the most versatile and delicate instrument of expression. Witness these sentences from the unforgettable description of Egdon Heath: "The spot was indeed a near relation of night, and, when night showed itself, an apparent tendency to gravitate together could be perceived in its shades and the scene. The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in

^x The Forum, Op.cit.

pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. ...The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank brooding to sleep, the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis—the final overthrow".

Fundamentally, Hardy is a poet; science is but a top-dressing which has determined his mode of expression. he sees with the eye of a poet, as compared with Henry James, who sees with the eye of a painter. It is therefore not surprising that this novelist who is apparently of the scientific school should turn from fiction to the form of literature least scientific of all, poetry.

In 1898 Thomas Hardy published a volume of "Wessex Poems", largely of a narrative character, many of which were the product of his early apprentice years. He has since published several volumes of verse, showing a steady growth of mastery over the poetic form which seems to hint that he might have been a great poet. Even as it is, he has won a distinct reputation as a poet.

Hardy has acknowledged a literary indebtedness to the poet Crabbe^x, and the character of his literary work, both verse and prose, is very like that of Crabbe. Both see life keenly, and paint it unflinchingly and with the freshness which comes of first-hand observation. Perhaps the main reason for the present lack of poets and the neglect of those we have - for we are continually reminded that our age neglects the highest form of literature - is that poets derive their inspiration

^x On authority of Clement Shorter, reported in The London Times, Sept. 18, 1905.

too exclusively from technique; they write sonnets whose main import is only implied,- that the author is a very artistic sort of a person. Our poets cultivate the fanciful phrase rather than imaginative power, and for this are they doomed to obscurity. Hardy may at least do the service to this age, as Crabbe did of yore, of restoring to poetry its birthright as an impassioned and constructive criticism of life; and perhaps thus prepare the way for the great poet who shall absorb the manifold aspirations of our time, clarify them for us, and preserve them for the future.

Hardy, however, is a poet by the heart and head rather than by expression. His language articulates too mechanically for poetry; it lacks the vision which overleaps logic. There is nothing in all Hardy to compare with this line from Shakespeare,

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank",
or this from Browning,

"The air broke into a mist with bells".
one is forced to sympathise somewhat with those who

think Hardy ought to continue writing his grand prose novels, such as "The Return of the Native" and "Far From the Madding Crowd". But Hardy has become somewhat insistent on revealing his philosophy in his later years, and he is impatient of the indirect form of narration. It is perhaps as well that he gives us poetry, not great, as that he should give us great novels torn to tatters by undue insistence on his philosophy. This little quotation is a fair sample both of his philosophy and of his terse, strong style of expressing it in poetry:

"Has some vast imbecility,

Mighty to build and blend,

But impotent to tend,

Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?"

When, in Hardy-esque phrase, the gods prompted the writing of "The Dynasts", a Napoleonic drama "in three parts, nineteen acts, and one hundred and thirty scenes", they played a jest at the expense of the critics. The greatness of the work was apparent; but the approximate degree of greatness was indetirminable, for there was nothing to place in the other end of the scales. Hence they have merely pronounced it great, and saved their critical standing by pouncing upon transgressions of the canons of art observable here and there, and exhibiting their acumen upon these several parts of an otherwise unwieldy mass.

Since the stupendous work was intended for "mental performance", it intensified the prevailing strife about the legitimacy of the "closet-drama". "What is the use of enjoying all the means open to the

story-teller", asks the dramatic critic of the London Times^x, "if he is to sacrifice most of those means to the vain hope of rivalling the play-wright, who has quite other means?"

However, I am not sure that this solution to the problem of the purity of literary genres is also a solution to the problem of "The Dynasts", Hardy wished to produce a certain effect: he wished to show the seething life of Europe, in all its variety, comedy and tragedy, the movements of kings and peasants, in those dramatic years from 1805 to the battle of Waterloo. And he wished to convey the impression that these people, from Napoleon down, were but the puppets moved by a blind force in a mechanical universe. The epic would seem the only form capable of expressing such a conception; but the epic demands heroes, not puppets; as a genre it would suffer as much at the hands of Hardy as the drama. "Something new and strange" was necessary; and here we have it.

If the scenes sometimes become rather uncanny,

^x A.B.Walkley, "Drama and Life", New York 1908, p.108.

as when Parliament debates in blank verse, we are amply recompensed by the little picturesque touches of common humanity which Hardy has scattered throughout the work. As a whole, the panoramic roll of one hundred and thirty scenes is remarkably concrete and convincing. Nor ought one to be too insistent on the uncanniness of the blank verse; for, in reality, it can be read as excellent English prose.

Like his contemporary writer of unacted plays, Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy has given the reader every aid for visualizing the scene. In these comments on the action he displays his great genius; far more than in the dialog proper. For instance, when the French and Russian armies bivouac on the eve of Borodino:

"The two multitudes lie down to sleep, and all is quiet save for the sputtering of the greenwood fires, which, now that the human tongues are still, seem to hold a conversation of their own".

Or these two epic sentences from the description of the burning of Moscow:

"Large pieces of canvas aflame sail away in the gale like balloons. Cocks crow, thinking it sunrise, ere they are burnt to death".

Occasionally we get the philosophic explanation. "At once a preternatural clearness possesses the atmosphere of the battlefield, in which the scene becomes anatomized and the living masses of humanity transparent. The controlling Immanent Will appears therein, as a brain-like network of currents and ejections, twitching, inter-penetrating, entangling, and thrusting hither and thither the human forms".

The chorus of Spirits Ironic express their enjoyment of the ironic artifices of circumstance, the Spirit of the Years tells with cold impassiveness of the meaninglessness of it all, and the young and inexperienced Spirits of the Pities bewail the unfortunate tangle. The last scene, an epilogue in the "overworld", is devoted to the various interpretations by these spirits; and it is permitted to end with a dim and distant hope sung by the Chorus of Pities.

Semichorus I of the Years(aerial music)

Last as first the question rings

Of the Will's long travailings;

Why the All-mover,

Why the All-prover

Ever urges on and measures out the droning tune of Things.

Semichorus II

Heaving dumbly as we deem,

Moulding numbly, as in dream,

Apprehending not how fare the sentient subjects of

Its scheme.

Semichorus I of the Pities

Nay;- shall not Its blindness break?

Yea, must not Its heart awake,

Promptly tending

To Its mending

In a genial germinating purpose, and for loving-kindness' sake?

Semichorus II

Should It never

Curb or cure

Aught whatever

Those endure

Whom It quickens, let them darkle to extinction swift
and sure.

Chorus

But - a stirring thrills the air

Like to sounds of joyance there

That the rages

Of the ages

Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the
darts that were,

Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion all
things fair!

"The Dynasts" must be read in the light of
Hardy's philosophy to appreciate its greatness; for
that greatness lies in its unified representation of
a stirring epoch. It is not a work to lightly read and
enjoy on a summer afternoon; it requires strenuous
work, not for the reading, but for reconstruction in
the reader's mind. Its conception is greater than its

execution. But to hold together in a unity a drama "in three parts, nineteen acts, and one hundred and thirty scenes" is not for the general; we shall have to preserve "The Dynasts" for the coming race of Supermen. At present the repose which comes with an appreciation of unity, will hardly be attained by the average reader of "The Dynasts". To him it will be not unlike the God of John Scotus Erigena, who could have no intelligible predicates, and was, therefore, in the words of Erigena, "on account of his pre-eminence, not improperly called Nothing".

What position Thomas Hardy will occupy a hundred years hence in the roll of English letters it is impossible to say. None can prophecy; for none can know the mysterious, revolutionary ways of posterity.

Yet whatever his significance will be, we can know that he will not be sought for the "bread of life". His works are the opposite of inspiring. They are a persistent exegesis of the meaninglessness and emptiness of existence. He has fascinatingly formulated a section of the problem of evil; but he has been blind to one whole side of the nature of man; so that his formulation is depressing only, and to the enlightened rather unconvincing.

But Hardy will be remembered, if at all, for the art with which he has wrought his powerful tragedies out of his pessimistic philosophy. He will be remembered

for his pictures of Wessex, its bleak uolands and rich lowlands, its woods and its grim Egdon Heath; and for his Shakespearean peasants. Men will delight in his heroines, and women will curse them in the gentle tongue of their sex. And that high seriousness and sincerity of the man which makes his work so epic, surely that will carry his name through many ages. Perhaps this mighty spirit of sincerity may pass into the frivolous authors of our own day, and become the heritage of the novel as a literary form. If so, it will realize its greatest possibility: of being the prose epic of an age zealous for truth and reality.

It is, indeed, towards this ideal that the influence of Hardy has tended in matters of technique. His genius is not revolutionary in matters of art theory. The artist must draw the world as he sees it, with the necessary simplifications due to artistic selection and construction. "An attempt to set forth the Science of Fiction in calculable pages is futility; it is to write a whole library of human philosophy, with instructions

how to feel"^X. But methods change with our knowledge and taste and education. For "nothing but the illusion of truth can permanently please, and when the old illusions begin to be penetrated, a more natural magic has to be applied."^X

Thus also is he linked with his own age. Whatever crudities of philosophy he may have advocated which are not representative of our time, in his intense sincerity and relentlessness as a truth-seeker, he is at one with us and can interpret us to posterity. Perhaps this will be for all time his greatest significance.

^X "The Science of Fiction", by Thomas Hardy. New Review, April 1891.

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