THOMAS HARDY & THE RURAL TRADITION

If it is true that we may be on the edge of a renaissance of heroic humanism, then it should also be the proper time to observe that, in a cultural sense, the word tradition has always carried within itself the weight of two inseparable meanings. The first has a bearing upon all that has been attempted in the unifying of mankind, the breaking down of barriers and the bridging of gulfs; it is international and universal in application; the second meaning relates to the regional and rural tradition which is the source of cultural variety. Culture, like society, is made up of many parts each contributing to the total effect, and Marx's definition that history is nothing but the progressive transformation of human nature is a reminder of the fact that the transformation which is taking place now is away from all the limitations of nationality towards a world-view which recognises the need for co-operation and the fact of inter-dependence.

If only because of the social influences which bear upon creative artists at the present time, they stand in danger of being carried away on abstract themes which could lead them to forget the homely and common-place factors which shaped them as men. Certainly there are large numbers of writers who must see things whole and who will take little account of parts; yet the pattern of world-culture is made up of regional and national cultures and it is safe to say that the narrower meaning of tradition will retain its attraction for those who are by training and natural aptitude inclined towards it. The regional novel, the rural record, the country book, all have a special place in the literature of any country.

In considering something of what has been accomplished in the creation of a rural tradition in that district which Thomas Hardy made his own—the West of England—a word may also be said on what remains to be accomplished. This district is not itself the area of Hardy's novels for that was confined to Wessex, or Dorset, but the spirit which is to be found in Hardy's peasants is the spirit also of the Devon rustics about which Eden Phillpotts has written. The West is one in its ways of thought and life because its people are dependent mainly upon the soil for bread and employment.

Hardy is one of the greatest of English regional novelists; it is not easy to discover any figure of equal stature and he will remain the corner-stone of the rural tradition he founded. He brought out the old legends, peasant-lore and bits of local history from their forgotten tombs; he gave form and colour to what was hitherto a mass of undigested historical fact and unrecorded folk-tradition. Hardy understood Wessex, or Dorset, because he gave it the

undivided attention of his energetic mind. Lionel Johnson wisely compared William Barnes with Hardy to illustrate the latter's triumph over provincialism. It is true that Hardy wrote of one area, but he brought into that chosen district all that he had learned from books and men. His criticism of life gained in depth because it was circumsribed: 'He laughs at Wessex', says Johnson, 'he is unsparing of Wessex, he delights in Wessex: with all the world round him, and all history behind him, he is content to find "infinite riches in a little room".'

It is this matter of discovering 'infinite riches in a little room' without forgetting the whole background of time against which it is set, that is supremely important. It is, in fact, the main task of the writer desiring to gain depth of penetration and minuteness of observation that he must lose in range and breadth. In order to find gold the prospectors of old searched long and diligently in the small piece of territory they had staked out as their own; and this the regional novelist has to do if he will explore with thoroughness the past or the present. A developed historic sense was one of Hardy's most obvious virtues and few regional writers have been able to achieve much of value without it. The historical novelist, for instance, who relies on local episodes for his basic material will find that life lived within the 'little room' is more easily recreated, the lives of ordinary folk receive a more detailed mention, than in the larger area outside where the past often becomes an elusive shadow.

For our purpose the two most important qualities in Hardy's work are his treatment of country types, and his delicate evocation of the true spirit of place. It has been estimated that Hardy wrote about nine or ten main country types, namely, the farmers, farm-labourers, the woodlanders, shepherds, furze-cutters, carriers, domestic servants, the casual workers who went from farmer to farmer in order to eke out a living, and the cottagers who were often small-holders with a few acres of land and a pride in their consequent independence wrested from that land.

The philosophic rustic who has appeared in so many West Country novels during the past twenty-five years was mainly Hardy's creation. He was able to present the slow-moving peasants in the true pattern of their environment; and he was able to do this because he understood something of the natural wisdom of the unlettered countryman whose life in close contact with nature had given him a mind full of a simple and worshipful love for the soil.

The philosophy Hardy worked out was a tragic one with Fate ruling a superstitious group of people who believed in witchcraft and

sorcery and were for ever seeking the aid of witches and conjurers if fortune served them ill. Such philosophy was based on the conception that it was natural for simple men to be fearful under the eye of a vengeful 'President of the Immortals'. The fatalism which is so pervasive in Hardy's novels and poems arose not wholly from the creator's mind; it was a natural happening noted by his mind as he observed life as it was lived in Wessex.

In trying to create the atmosphere of a place which he does with skill in some of his books, Hardy gave much time to the study of records and to the study of characters. He was interested in all the things that happened to the peasants and farmers who lived near him for they were the raw material upon which his creative faculty was constantly working. Also Hardy was very conscious of his vocation as an interpreter. It was his aim, he has said, to give impressions and not to advance arguments, but there is much argument in his work because the tenderness which was natural to him as a sensitive man was in conflict with the stern creed his intellect had forced him to adopt. Several writers have referred to the scientific character of Hardy's methods. One Victorian critic wrote: 'If this reverence towards the earth, and towards work upon it, is to be fruitful in literature writers must not only be full of sentiment, they must be full of science. In literature the place of experiment is taken by curiosity: by a desire to come at the heart of life in its various forms and manifestations.'

Always insatiably curious Hardy was stirred by the varied labour he saw in Dorset as he walked along the quiet lanes or stood leaning over lichen-covered gates watching men harrowing or harvesting. Yet it is this same desire to know, this same curiosity, which leads on to Hardy's primary defect as a regional novelist. Hardy was, of course, not a typical member of the middle-class, but life in those rural districts made him aware of the fact that he was at one with the parson and the squire, who were often insensitive oafs trying to appear lords of their little universe. A patrician by inclination Hardy was not classless, neither was he without class-consciousness. Therefore because of the conditions under which he lived he underestimated the labourer and attached little value to manual work.

There was also another thing which divided him from the working people. The Dorset peasants did not regard their prophet with honour, but rather with horror for his denials of their God and for the tacit condonation of what they held to be sin. They thought of the hermit of Max Gate with awe and dread as a heathen and an outcast. Hardy was hurt by this attitude, but what is more to the

point is that he was *isolated* by it. He was, that is to say, a spectator always alert, always watchful, but never a direct participant in the rural life about which he wrote with such genuine sympathy and insight.

Although in his books Hardy followed the life of the labourer through all its phases from birth to death, he did so as a knowledgeable stranger, a foreigner and an outsider to whom no labourer would talk freely. It is probably true to say that the Platonic scheme, which envisaged the manual worker as the servant of the philosopher, would not have seemed unnatural or unfair to Hardy. The late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch was right in saying that first of all and last of all Hardy was a countryman; but what he did not sufficiently stress was that as a novelist Hardy was forced by circumstances to rely upon a study of records and documents, upon observations of manners and customs, and not sufficiently upon the actual living human being. That fact may go far towards explaining why it is in books like *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath appears as a vast personification of the brooding and evil destiny that was Hardy's god and takes away from the interest in the characters themselves. It may be the reason why in books such as *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* the pessimistic philosophy and the dark determining background obtrude to too great a degree over the suffering characters. Hardy's has been called a childless philosophy; and it was also a cheerless one through lack of the right sort of human contact.

What of those who have followed in the authentic Hardy tradition? How have they shaped and developed that philosophy which has its roots in the land and its people? While Hardy was realistic and objective in dealing with his favourite theme, it ought to be said that of late a few writers have indulged, somewhat unwisely, in a glorification of the land for its own sake. This is surely the wrong attitude to adopt and is the result of a muddled and pseudo-mystical approach. The land should be valued, as Hardy undoubtedly valued it, because it is useful to man and draws out, in its own way, the powers that are latent in him.

In the West of England, for the most part, the observation and description have been often scientific; sometimes romantic and occasionally dull. Such writers as Henry Williamson and the late Llewelyn Powys can be cited as true descendants of Hardy if only because they show that reverence for the earth as the natural dwelling-place of men. Both have shown an interest in natural history, both indeed have that same worshipful attitude which is characteristic of the true countryman. Williamson is a novelist who

has been influenced in his style and in his thought by Richard Jefferies, while Powys was an essayist who wrote only one novel which was little more than a fragment of autobiography cast in fictional form.

Williamson came to live in a Devon cottage at the beginning of his literary career, and he made many friends in the county. Often he may have looked upon himself as an outsider, a person apart, but he was never isolated as Hardy was. He was able to learn by contact in village pubs, at markets or in the reading-rooms where village men gather after the work of the day is over. Anyone who knows the district around Barnstaple can find the proof of Williamson's genuineness as an artist in such books as *The Labouring Life* and *The Village Book*.

Powys was a sick man throughout his writing life; but he was Dorset-born and his illness did not cut him off altogether from contact with people. These two men did not feel that they were of another order than the peasants whose lives they observed and wrote about. Their books gain in sincerity and sympathy on that account. They have endowed the Hardy tradition not with the sentimentality, but with the humanity that it lacked because it was too far removed from it.

When all is said, however, it has to be admitted that no one has done for Devon or Cornwall, for Shropshire or Somerset, what Hardy did for Dorset. The true story of the Devon labourer—a narrative full of conflict and drama—has not yet been written; it is true that the fisherman's life has been dealt with in a manner worthy of Hardy's pen, in the novel *A Poor Man's House*, by Stephen Reynolds—a book which is a much greater artistic achievement than is generally allowed. What is needed now is not greater artistic ability, but more integrity, a greater care for the social fact so that writers may reach the core of the life they describe. In that way perhaps the rich resources of the varying regions of many lands will add not only to the sense of man's difference, but to that of his underlying unity and amity also.

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