THE NEGLECTED HARDY

A STUDY OF THE LESSER NOVELS

RICHARD H. TAYLOR

Ph.D.
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
1974
SUMMARY

The unity of Thomas Hardy's art and the completeness of his fictive world should not be underestimated, and only a reading of his work as a whole can reveal its consistency. But it is not a consistency of the kind sometimes imposed upon him by critics, and this makes him difficult to define. He is consistent not in his ideas but in his art. Though it is not original to say that it is the unusual way in which the individual impress of Hardy's mind is felt in his work that makes it distinctive, it is this quality which gives an inescapable unity to all his writing. In view of the obvious homology of all his works of fiction, it is odd that Hardy should be seen as notoriously uneven.

His reputation as a novelist is based upon only half his output of fiction. The other seven novels are traditionally regarded as being comparatively unimportant, as experiments and mistakes. A graph drawn to show the critical acceptability of Hardy's novels would reveal a curious pattern of peaks and valleys throughout his career, and this raises the question whether Hardy is an author of greater flexibility and range than is usually recognised, or whether the quality of his writing is simply extremely variable.

The modest reputation of the seven "neglected" novels -- Desperate Remedies, A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Hand of Ethelberta, The Trumpet-Major, A Laodicean, Two on a Tower and The Well-Beloved -- invites a new reading. It is wrong to isolate them as separate and distinct, as aberrations and "failures". They play an essential part in the dynamic process of Hardy's fiction. Yet it is sometimes difficult
to approach them without prejudice and to set aside the established value-judgements which may intervene between the reader and his direct engagement with the text. It may be useful, therefore, to see them as different rather than inferior, and to seek their peculiar and individual qualities. This study reverses the traditional order of priority and inverts the usual pattern of criticism of the novels. Because they emerge as more substantial works than the term implies, the comparative adjective "minor" is abjured in favour of calling them "lesser" novels. This acknowledges that they have peculiar weaknesses as well as peculiar strengths and that an attempt has to be made to discover what distinguishes them from the major novels. Above all the study has been motivated and sustained by the enjoyment of reading them, and the belief that they are of unique interest to those who value Hardy's fiction.

Several questions are borne in mind throughout. What do these lesser novels contribute to Hardy's canon as a whole and what is their relationship to the better known novels? What themes or other characteristics do they have in common and what do they tell us about Hardy and the development of his art? Conclusions are offered in a series of individual "case studies" which seek to discover the nature of each novel's deficiencies and to validate what is good in them. What emerges is the way in which they successively contribute to the interpenetrating unities of Hardy's fiction, and a vindication of my claim that Hardy never wrote a "bad" novel. The lesser novels are seen as more congeneric with the major fiction than the standard account suggests.

Two of Hardy's personal notebooks are presented and annotated in an appendix. Like the lesser novels, this holograph material has been largely neglected, and it has never been published in full.

iii
Title page .............................................. i
Summary .................................................. ii
Contents .................................................. iv
Acknowledgements ........................................ v

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION ................................. 1

CHAPTER II "WELL, THAT'S A RUM STORY": DESPERATE REMEDIES (1871) .......... 22

CHAPTER III FINDING A METHOD: A PAIR OF BLUE EYES (1875) .................. 71

CHAPTER IV NEW ANGLES OF VISION: ABOVE AND BELOW STAIRS IN THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA (1876) .......... 120

CHAPTER V HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PASTORAL IRONY: THE TRUMPET-MAJOR (1880) .......... 170

CHAPTER VI "A MAN HIT BY VICISSITUDES": ILLNESS AND A LAODICEAN (1881) .......... 212

CHAPTER VII LIFE-LOYALTIES: TWO ON A TOWER (1882) .................. 259

CHAPTER VIII PLATONIC IDEALISM AND "A FANCIFUL EXHIBITION OF THE ARTISTIC NATURE": THE WELL-BELOVED (1892, 1897) .......... 302

APPENDIX: HARDY'S 'MEMORANDA' NOTEBOOKS .................. 343
Foreword .................................................. 345
Introduction ............................................. 348

Textual Introduction:
(1) Physical description ................................ 358
(2) Principles of transcription .......................... 359

Acknowledgements ......................................... 360

'MEMORANDA, I' ........................................ 362

'MEMORANDA, II' ....................................... 415

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................ 504
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge gratefully the kind permission of the Trustees of the Hardy Estate to transcribe and reproduce various materials in the Hardy Memorial Collection, including extracts which appear in the following chapters and the personal notebooks which are presented in the appendix. I am most grateful to Mr. Roger Peers, Curator of the Dorset County Museum, and his staff, for allowing me access to many other papers and letters in the collection, and for their consistently friendly co-operation and helpfulness. I am equally grateful to the Faculty of Arts, University of Edinburgh, for two research grants in support of visits to Dorchester.

My thanks are due to Professor Sir Martin Ryle, the Astronomer-Royal, and Dr. Alan Hunter, Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, for their cordial assistance with my inquiries in relation to *Tove on a Tower*. Several specific debts of gratitude to those who, from their specialised knowledge, have contributed details to my annotation of Hardy's personal notebooks are gladly acknowledged in the Appendix.

Above all I am sincerely grateful to Professor K.J. Fielding and Mr. T.R.M. Creighton for their personal kindness, interest and generous expenditure of time. Their own example has been stimulating and their advice has been invaluable throughout the preparation of this thesis.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The worst chapter of The Hand of Ethelberta," Edmund Gosse wrote, "is recognizable, in a moment, as written by the author of the best chapter in The Return of the Native." \(^1\) Though Gosse does not define his critical terms, we can see at once what he means: that a common quality informs Hardy's whole oeuvre, the least fortunate aspects of the least regarded novels as well as the most imposing aspects of those most highly esteemed, with a stamp of "greatness". Hardy never wrote a "bad" novel. Among the fourteen that he wrote his range is considerable, his materials and methods diverse, and his idiosyncratic experiments often bold; but there is no "failure". The unity of his art and the self-possessed fictive world that he creates should not be underestimated, and only a reading of his work as a whole can reveal its consistency. But it is not a consistency of the kind sometimes alleged and often sought. Criticism, both individual and cumulative, has tried to define Hardy and his achievement more exactly than he would have wished. His "unadjusted impressions"\(^2\) have been knitted together, with greater

\(^1\) "Thomas Hardy", The Speaker, II (September 13, 1890), 295.

\(^2\) Preface to Poems of the Past and the Present (1902): "Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change" (August, 1901).
or lesser success, into fabrics that quite often do not in any real sense exist. The network is more complex than some such studies allow, and less ingenious than others. "The mission of poetry," Hardy said, "is to record impressions, not convictions" (Life, p.377), and this stands for all his art. This is not to say that Hardy is detached, or that conviction is absent: like the real firmness of Anne Garland, it is there, often "unperceived at first, as the speck of colour lurks unperceived in the heart of the palest parsley flower" (The Trumpet-Major, p.2). But Hardy's conviction is not set out in the form of convictions: the distinction is important. This makes him hard to pin down and define, but the response which his work provokes is all the more rewarding for its denial of ready definition.

It is not surprising that Hardy at last resists classification, either in mode or literary tradition. There is no other novelist who he is "like"; or, to put it another way, no other novelist is like him. It is not new to say that it is the unusual way in which the individual impress of Hardy's mind is made present in his work that makes it distinctive. But it is this which gives an inescapable unity to all his writing. Whether or not he is consistent in his ideas is a relatively minor question: few people are and the quality of consistency is not necessarily a virtue. It matters more that he is consistent in his art; that The Hand of Ethelberta, whatever its rank as a novel, can be recognised as the work of a great writer. Yet in view of the obvious homology of all his novels, it is one of the typical oddities of Hardy's experience that he should be seen as notoriously uneven. It is no less odd, and less understandable, that even now there is often an unwillingness
to accept that he is a great poet.

Hardy's situation is peculiar. His considerable reputation as one of the greatest novelists in the English language is based upon six (or at most seven) remarkable novels, only half his output of fiction. The reputation of few other modern novelists of comparable status rests on such a proportion of their work. We are left with the question: what are we to say of the other seven novels? They are traditionally regarded as minor works, as experiments and mistakes, and as comparatively unimportant. The critical lines have been sharply drawn and without significant dissent. If a graph were drawn to show the critical acceptability of Hardy's successive novels a curious pattern of peaks and valleys would emerge, and not only at the beginning of his career. After *Far from the Madding Crowd*, he wrote *The Hand of Ethelberta*; after *The Return of the Native* came *The Trumpet-Major*, *A Laodicean* and *Two on a Tower*; after three major novels which included *Tess*, he wrote *The Well-Beloved*. Either Hardy is an author of greater flexibility than the standard account suggests, or the quality of his writing is simply oddly variable.

The distinctions were not so finely drawn when the novels appeared. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* could be seen in 1873 as the work of a man of genius and *A Laodicean*, now regarded as his worst novel, could be highly commended in 1881. In 1890 *The Mayor of Casterbridge* could be found less perfect in its proportions than *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Some of these verdicts may now seem eccentric, and changes in sensibility and fashion as well as critical judgement have diminished the stature of several novels since then; but even in
1906, when The Pocket Thomas Hardy was published, with selections from his prose and verse, the most numerous extracts (after Tess and Far from the Madding Crowd) came from Desperate Remedies and A Pair of Blue Eyes. Yet the modest estimation of these novels cannot be attributed only to changes in taste; nor can critical wrongheadedness be blamed, though the impression sometimes remains that they have not perhaps been given a sufficiently serious reading. It is partly due to the remarkable qualities of the more successful novels, which have demanded and sustained extensive critical examination, and which can fairly be said to contain the centre of Hardy's achievement in prose. They represent such a major corpus of work that the remaining novels have been almost inevitably cast as a sub-group.

This derogation invites a new reading. It is surely wrong to isolate them as separate and distinct, as aberrations and "failures". They play an essential part in the dynamic process of the development of Hardy's fiction. Each stage of his career has its integrity and contributes to the integrity of the whole. To exclude the seven less successful novels is to distort his career and to disguise the interpenetrating unities of his fiction. Yet it is hard to approach them without prejudice, to escape the


4. Hardy's work has inspired so much research that (in the words of its publisher) a "mighty tome" has recently been published, running to 841 pages and 3,153 entries and five indexes, listing writings about him (H.E. Gerber and W.E. Davis, eds. Thomas Hardy: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Him, De Kalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1973). Yet most of this endeavour has been devoted to major texts while the remaining novels have received very little critical attention.
sometimes extreme and emotive critical language which has been applied to them (they have been called "execrable", "nonsense" and "trash"), and to set aside the established value-judgements which may intervene between the reader and his direct engagement with the text. It may be useful, therefore, to see these novels as different rather than inferior and to seek their peculiar and individual qualities.

This study reverses the traditional order of priority and inverts the usual pattern of criticism of the novels. Because these works are more substantial than the term implies, the comparative adjective "minor" is abjured in favour of calling them "lesser" novels. This acknowledges that they have peculiar weaknesses as well as peculiar strengths and that an attempt has to be made to discover what distinguishes them from the major novels. Above all, perhaps, the study has been motivated and sustained by the enjoyment of reading these lesser novels, and the belief that they are of unique interest to those who value Hardy's fiction.5

It would be wrong to offer an exaggerated estimate of the neglected novels, but they deserve a sympathetic (though not indulgent) reading. The Hardy who emerges is not somehow different and inferior, but the same Hardy revealed differently and seen from other aspects. It is conventional to say that Desperate Remedies fails because it is a pot-boiler. Yet all Hardy's novels are to some extent pot-boilers, written under economic duress as a distraction from poetry. Sometimes one becomes a masterpiece while others retain the marks of pot-boiling by a poet of genius. What

5The novels which will be considered are: Desperate Remedies, A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Hand of Ethelberta, The Trumpet-Major, A Laodicean, Two on a Tower and The Well-Beloved.
is remarkable is that by conventional standards some of the novels often appear so bad and yet retain their distinction. It is something different from the qualities which make the novels of James or George Eliot so highly valued. They were professionals in the sense that they believed in the novel and regarded it as a vocation or mission. It is not a lack of seriousness on his part or his unwillingness to theorise that distinguishes Hardy. Yet though he was a professional writer too, in the sense that he lived by fiction (and made a substantial fortune from it), he remained a poet by vocation and belief. He does not disregard the rules of fiction but, as a poet, often makes a decision of conspicuous daring. Sometimes his gamble comes off, sometimes it does not. Some melodramatic episodes, for example, in the lesser novels are objectively no more unacceptable than the death of Little Father Time in Jude. At the same time, as Virginia Woolf said,"his own word, 'moments of vision', exactly describes those passages of astonishing beauty and force which are to be found in every book that he wrote." She also said that the novels are "full of inequalities", and so they are. To put it another way, they are full of surprises; an occasional misjudgement, or a piece of clumsy writing, may unexpectedly vitiate the dramatic effectiveness of a scene in one of the masterpieces, yet the lesser novels contain some remarkable passages which are among his best, and some characters who, in their psychic definition and consistency, rival the acknowledged major figures. But Hardy's distinctive presence does not enliven every narrative equally and the reasons for this must be sought.

---

There is no doubt that the circumstances of composition and publication had an important bearing on each one of Hardy's novels, and for this reason the first part of each of the following chapters is devoted to setting the novel being considered in its context in Hardy's life and career, and examining its progress from genesis to publication. For the same reason there are references to contemporary criticism, since each novel's reception can be seen to have influenced Hardy's development. There are, for example, historical reasons for Hardy's excursion into writing an urban comedy of manners in *The Hand of Ethelberta* after critics had assigned his talents almost exclusively to pastoral fiction, and for his decision to present in *The Trumpet-Major* a relatively unchallenging entertainment after his serious intentions in *The Return of the Native* had met with critical disapproval. In each case Hardy can be seen as having been diverted from subjects and methods more congenial to his imagination; in one case into an ambitious experiment and in the other into a constrainedly moderate ironic tale, neither of which permitted him to rise to grand strokes. But it is in the demands of serial publication, and in particular Hardy's dealings with editors, that a number of limitations of these novels can be seen to have been imposed upon him. It was not only in the obvious instances (like *Tess*) that he had to battle to write as he wished; but up to and including his last published novel, *The Well-Beloved*, he never had the freedom he wanted. Like his immediate contemporaries, Hardy was a victim of his time. If he had been writing his novels fifty years earlier or fifty years later, he would have enjoyed far more freedom. Lawrence writes of Hardy's characters' wanting to burst out of Wessex.
and do extraordinary things. Their creator too was hampered by conventions. It is not that he wanted to escape the geographical or psychic limits of his fictive world, there being "quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose,"7 but the analogy is that he too was held back, in his art, by subjection to the more of timid editors. He was galled by what he called "the irritating necessity of conforming to rules which in themselves have no virtue" (Life, p.111). His early career was influenced, or even dominated, by his continuing ambition to write a novel suitable for publication by Alexander Macmillan; and later he was driven to compromise with his editors, who in turn felt driven to please their readers. He was, at various times, lectured by Macmillan, John Morley, William Tinsley, John Blackwood, Leslie Stephen, Donald Macleod, Clement Shorter and others. As a result a tension is often encountered in the lesser novels between the work Hardy wanted to write and the one he had to write to please his publishers. The one can sometimes be tantalisingly glimpsed through the other. Hardy did not want to be explicit in description, though he must have found the suppression of such harmless expletives as "Good God!" and "Damn!" (in The Trumpet-Major) tiresome and trivial. For his sardonic is mainly shown by implication and suggestion. (Very occasionally, though, he would reverse the usual process of retreat from offending convention, as in a curious and deliberate exacerbation of "offensive" circumstances in Two on a Tower: see Chapter VII.) It is in a more fundamental sense that these novels were affected. For

7 'General Preface to the Novels and Poems' (Wessex Edition, 1912).
Hardy, again in the words of Virginia Woolf, "a novel is not a toy, nor an argument; it is a means of giving truthful if harsh and violent impressions of the lives of men and women." The impulse to disturb which informs his fiction was not always what conventional drawing-room readers wanted, and in the lesser novels Hardy is often seen accommodating their preferences and eschewing the harshness and violence which is integral to his illumination of individual lives. The way in which publishing arrangements may have affected the eventual form (and consequently stature) of each of these novels will be examined.

The novels which according to received opinion are successful were written under much the same circumstances, and it may be said that one of the reasons why they are more imposing is that in them Hardy has not so readily deferred to his editors. In writing *Far from the Madding Crowd* he accepted the guidance of Leslie Stephen, but *The Return of the Native* was rejected by both Stephen and John Blackwood before it was eventually serialised in *Belgravia*. (Hardy had to discard his original ending in deference to serial tastes, however, as he makes clear in a footnote to *Book Sixth*, chapter III.) *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a less provocative text, was published by Smith, Elder, whose misgivings were restricted to the lack of gentry in the story. In *The Woodlanders* Hardy needed to make no significant concession to the sensibilities of his readers, and his extensive difficulties with *Tess* and *Jude* are well known. By the time he wrote *Tess* Hardy was more determined to write what he felt, even if for serial publication he had to compromise by making cuts which could later be restored; and he

8 *Collected Essays*, pp. 256-257.
accepted as inevitable that many readers would be offended by this novel and by *Jude*, since in extending his psychic investigation of Wessex to its limits he had to touch the raw nerves of his characters and through them those of his readers. But the "successful" novels also suffered less from circumstantial pressures because their stronger stories and situations made the more provocative aspects less exceptionable, and in novels like *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders* Hardy found congenial themes which he could deal with both as he wanted and as his public wanted. Although, always sensitive to editors and critics, Hardy found the course of his career deflected at various stages, and some of the defects of the lesser novels can be attributed to such accidents of circumstance, his sensitivity was in a way the artist's necessary defect; for "sensitiveness was one of Hardy's chief characteristics, and without it his poems would never have been written, nor, indeed, the greatest of his novels" (*Life*, p.415).

It is not always easy to isolate the artistic reasons why the lesser novels fail to attain the stature of the others. One explanation can be found in the reasons behind Hardy's own classification, in 1912, of his novels into three categories. The 'Novels of Character and Environment' include all the seven novels upon which Hardy's reputation as a novelist rests. Among the

---

9 Hardy told Robert Graves in 1921 that "he regarded professional critics as parasites" and "regretted having listened to them as a young man" (*Goodbye To All That* (London, 1929; rev.ed., 1957; 1960 edn.), p.250).

'Romances and Fantasies', one (The Trumpet-Major) has attained a moderate critical acceptance, while the others (A Pair of Blue Eyes, Two on a Tower, The Well-Beloved) tend to be regarded at best as interesting curiosities. The phrase describing the final group as 'Novels of Ingenuity' (Desperate Remedies, The Hand of Ethelberta, A Laodicean) is often regarded unsympathetically as an excuse for three inferior works. But the categories themselves, which suggest a deeper understanding of the exact nature of his own fiction than is often attributed to Hardy, go some way to explaining why certain of these novels elicit less response than others. It is exactly the psychic interplay of 'character' and 'environment' which sustains the reader's deeper interest in the major novels, and while this is not absent from the others, the effect is often reduced by other factors. Sensationalism dominates Desperate Remedies as fantasy of conception dominates The Well-Beloved, though both novels could potentially have been written on the more familiar plan. The 'Romances and Fantasies' have distinctly suffered from changes in sensibility. They are written with a moderation and romantic awareness that appeal less to our susceptibilities than the Victorians'. There is a softness in Hardy here to which he does not give way in Tess or Jude. But there are ironies too: sometimes on the surface, but sometimes submerged. There is both a strength and a weakness in such half-concealed ironies, which may have disrupted the leisurely expectations of serial readers perceptive enough to have seen them, and which often sustain the true implications of the work; yet this ambiguity dissipates their dramatic effectiveness. It is for Hardy a way of keeping his integrity when he is not equal to an outright challenge, and
it may not be too fanciful to suggest that, while he had to submit to "rules which in themselves have no virtue", he may have derived private satisfaction (or even solace) from the irony of knowing that his true meaning had been misunderstood. If the ironic dimension of the 'Romances and Fantasies' had been conveyed more unambiguously to the reader, they might have been more readily seen as congeneric with the major novels.

There is a circumstantial explanation for each of the 'Novels of Ingenuity'. *Desperate Remedies* is an unusually powerful first novel which belongs to, but extends beyond, the sensation genre. It suffers from defects of inexperience yet reveals at once its author's idiosyncrasies. *The Hand of Ethelberta* also derives from another genre, this time of the stage, but like *Desperate Remedies* goes beyond the limitations of its kind. Written to disprove inferences of Hardy's bucolic isolation (and concomitant restriction of range) drawn by critics after *Far from the Madding Crowd*, this ironic comedy of manners reveals an unexpected flexibility and the experiment is more successful than has generally been acknowledged. But both of these novels (and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*) are relatively early works, and all have a polymorphous quality. They contain an unusual range of concerns and strategies but they are ultimately not focussed sharply enough. In Hardy's own phrase, he had not yet discovered his "real literary message", and as a result his shot is scattered too wide. The major works are distinguished by greater concentration and unity. The third 'novel of ingenuity', *A Laodicean*, deserves to be rescued as much as any, if only because it is usually so uncompromisingly written off
as Hardy's worst novel. In fact it is by no means the least interesting, and it is mistaken to assume that, because for a long period it is laden with melodramatic devices, it is not a serious work. Its defects derive from the accident of its having been written under the stress of serious illness, and only this vitiated its early promise of being Hardy's most successful social comedy.

A Laodicean, in common with several others among the lesser novels, is (according to its own sub-title) "A Story of To-Day". This contemporaneity, deliberately adopted since Hardy wanted to address some of the social and intellectual problems of his day, has proved unacceptable to many readers. His sense of the past has such a powerful dramatic presence in most of his novels that when it is absent there is a feeling of something lost. The concept of "A Story of To-Day", predictably enough, makes a less direct appeal to the imagination than, for example, "A Story of a Man of Character" or that of "A Pure Woman/ Faithfully Presented". But the austerity of the sub-title, which applies equally to The Hand of Ethelberta and Two on a Tower, should not disguise the nature of Hardy's concern: the place of the emotions in a world increasingly ordered by science and reason. Social movements are in progress in all of these novels. They dramatise some of Hardy's most intimate preoccupations and inaugurate his investigation of what he later calls "the ache of modernism" (*Tess*, chapter XIX), which finds its conclusion in *Tess* and *Jude*. Our reading of those masterpieces in the total context of Hardy's fiction is incomplete if we ignore the incipient psychic fragmentation in the lives and experiences of the

---

11 *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Desperate Remedies* are also contemporary stories, though contemporaneity is less important in the theme of the former and irrelevant to that of the latter.
protagonists in The Hand of Ethelberta, A Laodicean and Two on a
tower. The intellectual movement of these novels, from Ethelberta
to Jude, is a consistent and organic process. And to some extent
the character typologies of the lesser novels relate to those in the
greater: it is not extravagant to relate Viviette Constantine (and
Elfride Swancourt) with Tess, or Paula Power with Sue Bridehead.
These claims are given substance in studies of individual novels in
an attempt to show that in them Hardy's intellectual view of his
fictional world coheres. It is not seen as a deliberate process,
which Hardy always insisted that it was not; his preoccupations take
shape not in the form of a philosophy but as responses to experience.
In this impressionistic series of individual histories he maps out
the limits of his intellectual concern.

What distinguishes the later novels in this respect is that
in them these fundamental "questionings" (to borrow another of Hardy's
evocative terms) are seen to better dramatic effect. The social
comedy of The Hand of Ethelberta, A Laodicean and Two on a Tower is
not the best form for these serious themes, which are inevitably
constrained by the mode. It is often easier, too, in the lesser
novels to isolate their 'subject'; the mature complexities of Tess
and Jude disallow such definition. But a further distinction is that
in the "stories of today" Hardy often moves into society outside
Wessex. Whatever the faults of the countryside, man as Hardy best
knows and instinctively understands him belongs in it. However
hostile it may be, there is a relationship. Communities in the
country, too, are inter-related: they join in choirs, bars, jobs,
even in turning against others. And though it may satisfy Hardy to
turn to the society outside the scenes with which he is most familiar
and has brought alive so convincingly, and express his dissatisfaction and restlessness, it is almost bound to seem less satisfactory to many readers. Perhaps Hardy need not have doubted his own later acknowledgement of the psychic completeness of Wessex, and his conviction that "the domestic emotions have throbbed in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe." These novels may satisfy intellectually, yet seem less satisfying as novels about human relations. But the question arises whether it is not, in part at least, our expectations which diminish these relationships, our unwillingness to let Hardy out of Wessex. Local circumscription is not equivalent to intellectual circumscription, and as Hardy properly claimed a circumscribed setting does not imply any diminution of elemental passions; he writes of "beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local [is] really universal." At the same time, the view that Hardy suddenly becomes incompetent when his dramas move outside the narrow geographical limits of Wessex needs to be challenged. These lesser novels with contemporary settings and cosmopolitan features have other defects: if their interest is partly to lie in the questions they raise, for example, we need to feel that Hardy is addressing these problems more openly and less obliquely. And these novels are to some extent weakened by internal tensions and individual structural deficiencies. But Hardy's incompetence in describing social situations in urban settings, and the belief that his alleged inability is attributable to ignorance, is simply a popular myth.

13 Ibid.
The objections may arise in part because the strong personal presence of Hardy in his work encourages the impression that there must be a closer than usual correspondence between the details of his plots and his own experiences, and the (incorrect) assumption that he had moved only in the circles which he normally describes in fiction. It is naive to suppose that any of the novels is "about" the facts of Hardy's life in a direct sense; they are much more diffused translations of his experience. But there is evidence which suggests that he did draw directly upon situations and incidents of his own life, especially in some of the lesser novels. Biographical speculation of the kind which seeks to define Hardy's relationship with Tryphena Sparks (on the basis of spurious evidence) is irrelevant to serious consideration of his art, and it is abjured in this study.

What we need to know is how Hardy transmutes his experience, and only biographical influences which are thought to contribute to this understanding are offered. Some such references are unavoidable since in the lesser novels there seems to be an unusually direct relationship, and possibly the extent to which Hardy sometimes has recourse here to circumstantial details of his own life sets another limitation on his art. The similarities between the basic situations of both A Pair of Blue Eyes and A Laodicean and Hardy's courtship of Emma Gifford at St. Juliot need not be laboured. The predominance of a series of passive young men with often remarkable historical and emotional similarities to Hardy himself (Springrove, Smith, Julian, Somerset, St. Cleeve), three of them architects, establishes a groove of characterisation from which he escapes in the major novels; these apparent doppelgangers are all distinguished by a relative lack of animation and contribute little to the novels in
which they individually appear. Elsewhere Hardy's immediate experience enriches his subject: both A Pair of Blue Eyes and The Hand of Ethelberta contain unusually direct comments on fiction and criticism, reflections on the nature of Hardy's developing craft. And in several of these novels Hardy's background and direct experience helps us to understand the direction of his social criticism and satire. A Laodicean is a unique case since we have Hardy's own word that it contains "more of the facts of his own life" (see chapter IV) than any other novel, and the weakness of those sections in which, because of illness, he falls back upon such facts is instructive about the extent to which facts have to be distilled and transformed to be artistically convincing; yet the comparative bareness of the narrative throws into prominence Hardy's own fears about the contingencies of the modern spirit. None of these biographical correspondences or influences in themselves make any difference to the value we set upon the novels as fiction, but they are suggestive constituents of the final texture of the work. Hardy's emotional commitment always vitalises the narrative, and it is only when he comes close to translating biographical reality more directly, as he does more often in the lesser novels, that a limitation of creative imaginativeness is sometimes imposed.

It is not only the men who are beneficially coloured by his personal engagement. One of the most positive features of the lesser novels is a series of remarkable women, compulsive and psychically complete. Miss Aldclyffe is powerful and individual; Elfride, Paula, and especially Viviette, in their combination of purposiveness, docility and human weakness, are sympathetic and endearing. Though none of them is unequivocally rewarded, they are
creatures of Hardy's profound understanding and reverence for humane values. Ethelberta is unique: the most ambitious and worldly of all Hardy's heroines, the first of the moderns and metaphysically divided against herself, she is a moral study and the implications of her psyche are frightening. Hardy is always at least as interested in examining a life as telling a story. His best fictions are individual histories. His first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, is dominated by plot, but even here Manston is no stock villain, Miss Aldclyffe no stock virago. Hardy's fiction increasingly moves towards a situation where the individual history becomes the organising principle of the story, the proper mode for "a true exhibition of man." 14 If in the lesser novels the characterisation is more diffuse, a quality which they share with *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders* in particular among the major novels, the internal tensions which give life to characters are not absent. As early as *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the principal protagonists have moved beyond stereotypes, and in *The Hand of Ethelberta* the possibilities of the individual history are tentatively explored: the potential stature of the central figure is contained only by the mode in which the novel is written.

Each of the lesser novels contains surprises, whether it is the extraordinary definition of Ethelberta's character or the discovery that a clearer account of Hardy's social views can be derived from *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Laodicean* than from any of

---

14 "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" (1888); in Harold Orel, ed. *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1966), p.115.
the more conventional sources. The more closely they are read, the clearer it becomes that they are a series of essential pivots on which Hardy's entire career turns. They do not fail to come at vital moments in his development and (the earlier ones especially) always portend something new which is later subsumed into the texture of the major works. Several of them are experimental, often boldly so, and reveal a flexibility which traditional accounts of Hardy's range deny. A theory of his fiction cannot be evolved from a study of these novels alone, but no such theory is complete if it does not take them into account.

At last no single or generalised explanation can be assigned for their being lesser works, and their variety resists any generic definition. They each have individual strengths and weaknesses, which will be examined in turn, and they have almost certainly all suffered from the prejudicial consequences of marginal characteristics too. It is not unlikely, for example, that even their titles have predisposed readers against them. A Pair of Blue Eyes is weak, The Hand of Ethelberta unprepossessing, Two on a Tower simplistically alliterative (Hardy afterwards disliked it), and A Laodicean is for many readers uncertain in origin, spelling, meaning and pronunciation. Hardy's best titles are imaginatively straightforward (The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure), spatially or personally definitive, and suggestive of the concentration of subject in the novels which they describe.

Hardy, as much as any other author, has invited some degree of misrepresentation and misjudgement. Preconceptions about his writing have, at various times, readily hardened into myth: that he