

Jude the Obscure
as
Hardy's Turning-Point

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1.

The highest praise of this novel was first said not in England but on the other side of the Atlantic when Edwin A. Robinson told his friend of his conviction that this was Hardy's single "true" book¹. The soft voice of the rejected American poet was naturally lost in the vociferous criticisms then prevailing on both sides of the ocean. Though seemingly insignificant, this unheard praise, in fact, has much bearing upon the right approach to this novel.

Not accepted by the literary world and his "Captain Craig" having been rejected several times, Robinson undoubtedly found Jude the derrick a rare parallel to himself. His whole soul must have been absorbed in the novel when Jude says, "Now I know I have been a fool, and that folly is with me. And I don't regret the collapse of my University hopes one jot. I wouldn't begin again if I were sure to succeed.

1, Emery Neff : Robinson, p. 130

I don't care for social success any more at all,"²⁾ or when Sue consoles Jude by saying, "Your worldly failure, if you have failed, is to your credit rather than to your blame. Remember that the best and greatest among mankind are those who do themselves no worldly good. Every successful man is more or less a selfish man. The devoted fail."³⁾

More basically thought through, this fact indicates more than the mere similarity between the praiser and the praised in social situation as well as in the view of life: Robinson being wholly a poet in its strict sense of the word, it suggests rightly the unique character and charm of this novel: and that the only praiser was neither a novelist nor a critic but a poet is sufficient to predict and interpret the destination of this novel.

2.

Jude the Obscure follows a group of Hardy's novels, a dozen in number. In writing these novels, Hardy, once a stone-mason, has painstakingly worked on the building, piling stones, putting in much of Gothic atmosphere and polishing with his skilful hand. There have been fixed the foundation, plot developed by his basic philosophy; the columns in rows, major and minor stories among the Wessex farmers and peasants; the roof and decorations, his love of story-telling and his unique touch of imaginative creation.

Now that the cathedral has been brought to completion, Hardy is contented with himself, though there has been some criticism about his work. Above the criticism stately stands the building. Hardy is so convinced of its success that he feels urged to show the newly built cathedral to the people widely and most appealingly. Furthermore, he must preach to them who have gathered there for the show.

2. Jude the Obscure, p. 150

3. *ibid.* p. 433

His appeal or rather attack is now aimed right at the society, more specifically, at the privileged urbans and the favored high-class, the intellectual center of the society, neither of which Hardy belongs to. He must do it at any cost, and he is now ready to do it by presenting his long-embraced doubts about the established, socially and biblically, and expounding his beliefs concerning the mechanism of the universe. His interpretation of life in the universe has been repeated forcibly and effectively in his previous works. Indeed, any of his novels reveals it wholly; Hardy, from the very beginning of his novel writing, puts in every chapter a cruel answer, very definite and never changeable, to the questions constantly rising among the deprived and desperate, or the bereaved and bewildered. So far, however, Providence or the will of the universe has been to blame. What is now to blame is for indignant Hardy the society itself.

George Meredith, reading Hardy's first novel in manuscript, was quite surprised at something entirely new in it, but the publisher's reader did not think it wise to arrange for its publication. The would-be first novel was apparently full of skirmishings against society, the author being young and straightforward. At this time Hardy was advised not to be so impatient in his zeal for reformation of the society but to be wiser and more tactful in propagating his appeal. And this was accepted and done. It was the most helpful advice ever given to Hardy: thanks to it, he has been able to mitigate his zeal for more practical effects and moreover to control the overflow and burst of his poetic emotion under prosaic construction. Now the time having elapsed long since Meredith once gave him the advice, the passionate author finds himself urged to try the most dangerous task, an open attack on the society.

4. Edmund Blunden: Thomas Hardy, p. 30

Though much talented in creative imagination, he has been wise enough to be cautious not to write too much about what he has not directly experienced. In particular, what impressed the tender heart in his early years only has been the predominating factor in his literature: sorrows and joys, pains and pleasures entwined with nature that the pensive boy experienced in his native land, certainly a narrow realm, have been repeated in his narratives: so that those experienced in his adulthood seem to have made very little impression upon the precocious writer in terms of impetus of his novel-writing. Remaining in his range, he is happy and fluent; there he has never felt out of place in setting the stage and directing characters, both so congenial with him, thus his powerful creativeness having resulted in the series of novels. And more specifically it is nature of the Wessex photographed on the film of his memory that will enrich and enliven his pen; that will keep the author keen and vivid in the development of his plot.

This time, however, Hardy takes Jude out of Marygreen that is comparable to the Wessex county. He does so for two purposes: to attack the society directly, by setting the hero around the target; to carve the figure of the hero as pathetic as possible, by plunging him right into a strange, hostile environment. Otherwise Jude won't be any different from Clare, and Jude is meant, in Hardy's plan, to be more appallingly tragic than the latter. Thus leading Jude, Hardy leaves his native land. In other words, he leaves the source of his flowing imagination and the impetus of his creative force. Out of Marygreen it is not only Jude, the hero of the tragedy, but Hardy himself, the writer of it, that has to stray timidly on a strange land; imbuing Jude first but gradually imbued by him later, Hardy begins losing the sense of perspective in Christminster in painting the hero and the rest. Dream—Jude's shadowy dream of what is not at Marygreen is now brought in to take the place of

nature without which the novel may remain dim and dreary. But his imagination, when devoid of the impetus of nature, invariably tends to be less understandable in connection with the development of the story. And what is worse, once Hardy treads into the world of imagination, he often finds it utterly hard to control his pen, totally obsessed with thrill and excitement of hovering imagination and grotesque fantasy; and to remember that the character he is presenting should be to some extent universal as human beings. This tendency is so innate with him that heredity, whose believer and defender as he is, seems as if driving him with the pen. His creativeness is certainly tremendous, but the created are sometimes such phantom-like beings that it is hard to convince the reader that this is a novel of urgent reality.

4.

Though this novel marks the end of his novel-writing, as he says, "... the experience completely curing me of further interest in novel-writing," and though he actually emerges, after this, wholly as a poet, the dividing line can hardly be drawn here.

In spite of lack of critical sense, he has in some way or other managed to keep writing novels with considerable success so far. Formerly he once was an architect by profession, which has proved to be a very useful experience in that it has helped him to develop the sense of construction and skill in craft, the two factors that have given his poetic abundance adequate forms of expression as novels. In addition to that, the reader's appreciation of his powerful creativeness as well as of his unique charm of style, has encouraged him in clinging to that type of work.

Nevertheless the balance between the two, prose and poetry, has

been destined to collapse sometime and somewhere in him, the innate poet with blazing passion; or basically his novels, though prose in form, have been half-way to poetry. And now it does collapse here in this novel. His statement that he wants to leave novel-writing for poetry for the reason that the public does not fully appreciate this particular novel, Jude the Obscure, is rather an overstatement. The truth is that his departure from novel-writing is not because of the criticisms from outside world, as he pronounces, but because of the nature itself that his novels have borne. When overcharged with poetic potentials, prose must burst out from within as a natural course; prose in its highest commotion sublimates itself into poetry.

This does not, however, indicate this novel stands highest in terms of poesy. In that respect, previous ones such as Tess and The Return of the Native are superior to this. Indeed, with his innate talent of poetic imagination too powerful to be controlled by his comparatively poor sense of self-criticism, these two are, as novels, the paramount masterpieces within his realm and reach. Any further step with similar scheme and skill invariably means descending. In fact, he is descending; but he does not believe he is. Burning aspirations like Jude's keeping his eyes up from the downward path, he treads on.

Beethoven, after having completed his ninth symphony, certainly the climax of its form of music, starts devoting himself to another type of work; his artistic insight discerns the situation and prevents him from working on the will-be tenth symphony. With Hardy, on the other hand, Jude the Obscure, of the same type of work as those previous ones, is precisely comparable to the tenth symphony, the unfortunate anticlimax. Though keen itself, his artistic insight is blurred by motives for attacks on social deformities. Passionate and even defiant against the wrong in the society, he feels determined to plunge this novel into the heart of it as a most dynamic criticism. It is obvious that besides

pure satisfaction on his part derived from writing a novel, he is quite confident of his direct influence on the audience. Thus with might and main strikes he higher notes.

5.

The characters of this novel, in brief, are overburdened with the author's intentions.

Characters are more or less the created in the image of the author; consequently they are the most direct and powerful spokesmen. They are, in other words, the whispered and the revealed out of what has been hoarded in the author's bosom. Like clouds supercharged with electricity, characters in their revelation may be accompanied by thunders and lightnings. But obtrusive repetition of the accompanying is not pleasant to the reader; and too much of it is so often repulsive.

It is natural that the author's philosophy is expressed through the lips of characters, but the philosophy thus put in should not come back in the way that makes the reader feel too much of the author. Here is needed critical sense which disguises the author as many characters, seemingly different and yet realistic. Otherwise, the reader will find it hard to distinguish the novel from an essay or a thesis on the questioned philosophy. However stimulated it may be by motives for the reformation of society, a novel should be different by nature from a sermon; characters, therefore, should not be mere propagandists of the author's philosophy or preachers of his profession.

Jude is here described as an extraordinarily precocious boy. As a small boy under ten, he feels "the pricks of life somewhat before his time"⁶ and feels living "in the world which does not want him just like the rooks there."⁷ At the age of eleven, gazing at the halo in the direc-

6. *ibid.*, p. 5

7. *ibid.*, p. 11

tion of Christminster, he says to himself, "It is a city of light," and "The tree of knowledge grows there." He adds a few steps further: "It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion."⁸⁾ Here is not supposed to be contemplating a grave philosopher of gray hair, nor is here a poet uttering a few lines in a nostalgic mood. Apparently putting Jude aside, Hardy is exposing himself here.

Incredibly sensitive and pessimistic as a little boy, "he wished he had never been born,"⁹⁾ at his inability to start reading easily the book of Latin grammar which Mr. Philltson had sent him.

After Arabella intrudes upon him, he at the first touch of her temptation, collapses down a victim, most miserable, of it. The development of the story in this point sounds not without a little of abruptness, since Jude has been so far described so aspirant intellectually and yet so pessimistic about his given life as a little boy that he has looked to the reader a form without flesh. With his weakness the reader can hardly have any sympathy at all. Complete degradation at the sacrifice of his long-embraced dreams in this case appears to be even ugly. Thus from early in his career, he gives the reader a feeling of sickness, discouraging him from following the story.

As he grows older, he becomes increasingly harder for the reader to understand; he is there incredibly inward and impotent, obnoxiously unsteady and fragile. Visiting Mr. Philltson, his old teacher, who incidentally does not instantly recognize the former pupil, Jude is bewildered, "wishing he had not come."¹⁰⁾ This is simply a variation of "I should not have been born," the very theme of his view of life that is played repeatedly and forcibly all through the novel.

Again Jude feels "he should not have come" in his intended and

8. *ibid.*, p. 24

9. *ibid.*, p. 31

10. *ibid.*, p. 121

appointed visit to Sue, when he happens to find her walking with Mr. Philltson whose arm she lets remain around her waist, "she looking quickly round her with an air of misgiving."¹¹⁾ And Jude "could not bear the thought" that Sue saw him the previous night when he was drunken, and slips "noiselessly out of the house" before Sue comes down. She is neither an ill-tempered house-keeper nor a strict teacher; she is the one Jude loves most passionately. And yet Jude is too afraid to be seen by her. And the subsequence is that "his fixed idea was to get away to some obscure spot and hide, and perhaps pray" and finally "he fell asleep for a short while, and when he awoke it was as if he had awakened in hell. It was hell—the hell of conscious failure both in ambition and in love."¹²⁾

"Ridiculously inconsistent,"¹³⁾ as Sue describes rightly, Jude is presented far beyond a realistic person. Hardy, the reader feels, plays too much on exaggeration of Jude's weaknesses in order to put him into the abyss, the deepest deep of desparation. From the very beginning of his career, the "queer" hero almost cries his eyes out in a miserable set of life; degraded and destroyed, he continues undergoing a series of tragic culminations. His start takes place right in the deep where he feels "he should not have been born," and consequently the eventual development toward what is more tragic tends naturally to be less moving than is expected. Tragedy is a relativity. Here lies the reason for ineffectualness of the consecutive calamities and the catastrophe. Tragedy, overwrought, loses power to convince the reader. Suggested by the miseries Job experiences in the Old Testament, Hardy, having exhausted his resources of the tragic, boldly supplies for Jude the grotesque as well as the wild and the unlikely. And this is the occasion when he is

11. *ibid.*, p. 130

12. *ibid.*, p. 148

13. *ibid.*, p. 251

in danger of his characteristic talkativeness, ceaseless and self-amusing, thus extending beyond control of his critical sense.

Thus Jude reveals himself as a mere puppet grossly infused with the author's intellect and intention. Jude is fatally suffering from artificiality in action and oration. So is Sue, the advanced type of woman, who declares, ". . . . but it seems such a terribly tragic thing to bring beings into the world—so presumptuous—that I question my right to do it sometimes."¹⁴⁾; so is Mr. Philltson, the meditative pessimist, who sighs, "Cruelty is the law prevading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would."¹⁵⁾; and so is the doctor, "an advanced man," who at the death of Little Time and the other two children, predicts, "It is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live."¹⁶⁾ They are a group of super-sensitive, philosophical-minded people without any bit of confidence in life; they assume an air of morbidity.

A clear contrast with them is Arabella, who sounds most healthy, realistic, and normal when she exclaims, "Feelings are feelings! I won't be a creeping hypocrite any longer," and furthermore, "I must be as I was born."¹⁷⁾ Arabella, though apparently preesented as a wicked woman, transfigures herself in the eyes of the reader, strange enough to the author's intention, to one no longer ugly or detestable. On the contrary, to the reader, weary of the depressed characters imbued with the author's theory of the universe, Arabella is a relief, even balmy and refreshing. She is a relief from too much of Hardy or more specifically, from his wild, Gothic imagination that is now ceaseless. Arabella, more human than any of other figures in the novel, stands conspicuous on the stage in a clear contrast with other players, those indoctrinated by Hardy beyond their capacity as human beings.

14. *ibid.*, p. 370

15. *ibid.*, p. 379

16. *ibid.*, p. 402

17. *ibid.*, p. 376

As the story goes on, Jude's queerness remains the same, but is now gradually overshadowed by the appearance of Little Time, his son born of Arabella. In Little Time Hardy's ceaseless fancy-play finds its final and powerful culmination.

The boy is introduced as remaining too somber to laugh, though all other adult passengers laugh in the train, at the tabby kitten that is indulging in playful antics. How could such a little boy, physically normal, keep himself from being excited at the funny motions of a kitty? Once introduced, the boy's character is intensified in abrupt crescendo: "the solitary boy . . . seemed mutely to say: 'All laughing come from misapprehension. Rightly looked at there is no laughable thing under the sun.'¹⁸⁾ What a fantastic boy he can ever be! Here sounds groaning a Schopenhauer in disguise. Hardy lets his imaginative impulse gush out with sparkling flashes without refrain. It is not Hardy the novelist but Hardy the poet that is writing those lines :

He was Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through crevices. A ground swell from ancient years of night seemed now and then to lift the child in this his morning-life, when his face took a back view over some great Atlantic of Time, and appeared not to care about what it saw.

When the other travellers closed their eyes, which they did one by one—even the kitten curling itself up in the basket, weary of its too circumscribed play—the boy remained just as before. He then seemed to be doubly awake, like an enslaved and dwarfed Divinity, sitting passive and regarding his companions as if he saw their whole rounded lives rather than their immediate figures.¹⁹⁾

To Sue who is wondering why he has not been christened, Little

Time answers: "Because, if I died in damnation, 'twould save the expense of a Christian funeral."²⁰⁾

His indifference to the kitty in the train is not anything temporary caused by weariness of the trip he has made; it is his insensibility as is shown in the following development. The Wessex Agricultural Show is grand and exciting enough to make moody Sue remark: "I feel that we have returned to Greek joyousness, and have blinded ourselves to sickness and sorrow"; but it is powerless in cheering Little Time, "whom, though they had taken him to everything likely to attract a young intelligence, they had utterly failed to interest."²¹⁾

Little Time looks so aged that Jude is tempted to consider him as an intelligent adult who will easily understand such his poetic remarks, an answer to his son's question, as follows: "Because of a cloud that has gathered over us; though we have wronged no man, corrupted no man, defrauded no man! Though perhaps we have done that which was right in our own eyes."²²⁾ How empty Jude's response to Little Time sounds! This is not a conversation possibly understandable to the boy; it is a vacant monologue—monologue being spoken by Hardy himself who bursts out to give his lectures to the reader.

Eventually Little Time reveals himself as a prophesy. He almost puts Jesus to shame by his Messiah-like oration and action. And in reality, he is the Messiah of Hardy's world, as he is destined to kill himself as well as two other children as the wages of sin of the Fawleys' world. Perceptive of things around, he, at the darkened sky with thunders, whispers in a tone of a prophesy, "It do seem like the Judgment Day!"²³⁾ To him even college buildings, which Jude is showing him,

20. *ibid.*, p. 333

21. *ibid.*, p. 353

22. *ibid.*, p. 366

23. *ibid.*, p. 387

look queerly associated with death: he asks, "Are the great old houses gaols?²⁴⁾"

The conversation between Little Time and Sue while Jude is away at another inn, is most fantastic. It is literally dead, suffering from too much of artificiality.

"It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?"

"It would almost, dear."

"'Tis because of us children, too, isn't it, that you can't get a good lodging?"

"Well—people do object to children sometimes."

"Then if children make so much trouble, why do people have 'em?"

"O—because it is a law of nature."

"But we don't ask to be born?"

"No indeed."

"And what makes it worse with me is that you are not my real mother and you needn't have had me unless you liked. I oughtn't to have come to 'ee—that's the real truth. I troubled 'em in Australia, and I trouble folk here. I wish I hadn't been²⁵⁾ born'."

Little Time, less than ten years old, here speaks out the same words as his father Jude: "I wish I hadn't been born." This is a repetition of the key note which consummates Hardy's scheme of the novel. And right after this conversation, blaming Sue for her expecting another baby in the near future, Little Time cries in bitter reproach, saying,

"How ever could you, mother, be so wicked and cruel as this, when you needn't have done till we was better off, and father well!—To bring us all into more trouble! No room for us, and

24. *ibid.*, p. 393

25. *ibid.*, p. 398

father a-froced to go away, and we turued out to-morrow; and yet
you be going to have another of us soon! 'Tis done o' purpose!
—'tis—'tis²⁶⁾."

The more *Little Time* becomes serious and reflective about the problem of life, the less realistic the sentences sound untill the whole picture painted here with much pain assumes an air of caricature.

6.

In the sense that the charaters are queer, the scenes covered with the sense of unreality, the pitch highly poetic, Jude the Obscure reminds the reader of Poe's short stories.

In Poe there exist two persons simultaneously: a magnificent craftsman and mathematician and a creator of beauty, both being so cleverly balanced and accomplished in his short story that the reader is never tempted to contemplate on its reality or unreality. Poe's short story gives the reader the sense of stability. Not a moralist, actually far from it, he has no particular message for the reader. What Poe is aiming at in his prose is neither the convincing reality nor the propagation of his philosophy of life; he writes purely for the sake of beauty itself.

Hardy, on the other hand, is too passionate and ambitious to remain a mere creator of beauty; he is haunted by the victims of the society untill his motives for writing are tinged with social criticism, and at the same time he is constantly concious of efforts of making the novel as realistic as possible. But the former, with his love of the dramatic, overwhelms the latter.

7.

In his preceding novels such as Tess and The Return of the Native his characteristics have been revealed in good harmony. There they are

26. *ibid.*, p. 399

combined or knit together in harmony thus playing impressive melodies. These characteristics, however, if once scattered, turn out to be impatient rather than impressive. In extreme, free from any linking limitation, they tend to be feverish or even hysterical, each of them being intensified in its own way until the whole loses balance.

The characters of this novel are with a few exceptions incredibly sensitive, pessimistic and fragile, more so than any of those sketched by him in other novels; they are, to the common sense, beyond comprehension.

The stage is one darkened and obscured completely from the very beginning; flickering light is seen once in a while when desperate Jude strikes a match, but the stage remains almost the same and only the smell of sulphur is sensed.

His poetic creativeness bursts out in abundance intermittently all through the novel. There are paragraphs and passages that flow in poetic beauty. They are, however, dreams disconnected with severe reality of the scene; and songs without words in coherence with the act.

His interpretation of human life in terms of mere shadow-shapes of the master of the show, is emphasized to extreme. It is no longer suggested covered with a veil of some incidents or implied in a mitigated way in the development of the story; his passion turning to propaganda, it is most directly preached and proved there.

The plot is meant to be most appallingly tragic: the author drives like mad the poorest hero into the abyss, by ceaselessly flinging to him a succession of antagonistic situations and unhappy incidents. Only for the sake of tragedy itself, Little Time must hang the two juniors and kill himself; Jude must be separated from Sue and die cursing and cursed. As the plot grows more and more improbable, the hero sounds almost hideous rather than pathetic.

His characteristics magnified and intensified as well, his merits and

faults are most clarified in this novel, and it is in this sense that this renders the reader a key to full appreciation of his work, both prose and poetry. This incongruity of the whole, on the other hand, inevitably leads the author to his emergence as a poet; just as the world described in this novel has no hopeful light in his sight, so is there no way of escape or advancement for him unless he be a story-teller no longer: a born poet, Hardy has been from the outset destined to this transformation. This novel, in its highest intensity, burns itself down.