

Review

READING THOMAS HARDY: RESHAPING *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

J. T. Laird, *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1975. \$27.50.

Geoffrey Thurley, *The Psychology of Hardy's Novels: The Nervous and the Statuesque*, University of Queensland Press, 1975. \$11.50.

A consideration of these two books activates a whole set of reviewer's reflex phrases and postures, ringing the changes on "contrasting contributions to the current spate of Hardy studies". I do not want to analyse that spate of studies, but simply to make the obvious remark that it leads to our asking different questions and reformulating old ones. There is the danger, of course, that this may mean only that new mythologies replace old ones: in the case of Hardy's biography, for instance, the interpretative excesses of the Tryphena revelations of the 1960s supersede the myths developed in Hardy's own *Life* concerning such matters as his emotional history and the process of composition of various works.

At all events, in the new orthodoxy Hardy is regarded as a major artist, to be distinguished in terms of his sensitivity to the changing fabric of a changing world, no longer revered or dismissed as a rustic fatalist piping native woodnotes. The crucial problem in discussing his fiction insistently emerges as how to account for its extremes and contradictions, such as the juxtaposition of precise, individualizing prose with the strains of the ethereal and cosmic. Ian Gregor put the question in the form, "What kind of fiction did Hardy write?", and for all that some consensus about Hardy's stature has been achieved, this basic question still elicits many different kinds of response.

Laird's book, and Thurley's, each provide a means of approaching the question. The contrast is of a kind frequently seized on by reviewers, between a scholarly study, wrought out of immersion in the intricacies of manuscript and printed versions of a single Hardy novel, and an interpretative essay ranging from *Desperate Remedies* to *Jude the Obscure*, asserting the fundamental importance of recognizing the typological basis of characterization to an understanding of all Hardy's fiction. Neither book offers a new kind of study of Hardy, but continues traditional approaches: Laird's study of the text of *Tess* can be seen as developing ultimately from Mary Ellen Chase's pioneering *Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel* (1927), while arguments for some sort of typological basis for Hardy's characterization have been recurrent—in Lascelles Abercrombie's book of 1912, D. H. Lawrence's *Study of Thomas Hardy* (1914; published 1936), and, more recently, in an article by Richard Beckman, "A Character Typology for Hardy's Novels" (*ELH*, 1963). To have acknowledged the persistence of such an approach to Hardy's characters would not have detracted from Thurley's claim for the pertinence of his particular typology, and might indeed have drawn attention to its efficacy in explaining matters not accommodated for instance by Beckman's seasonal division.

I should declare here that I find *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"* a more satisfying book than *The Psychology of Hardy's Novels*.

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Laird's restrained exposition, though covering some familiar ground, convincingly establishes a complexity in *Tess* which has implications for reading other of Hardy's novels. Thurley, on the other hand, claims to offer the key to Hardy, but, being committed by his thesis to demonstrating the simplicity which generates apparent complexities, tends to oversimplify.

The Psychology of Hardy's Novels is one of those books that has outgrown its strength. I don't think it lasts the distance as a full-length critical study, though there is matter for a number of very stimulating articles. As it is, there is a good deal of repetition of the basic idea, that there is "a distinctive and characteristic dichotomy in Hardy's characterization: a type of human being based upon flexibility, movement, rhythm, balance, is confronted, opposed, or attracted by one based upon solidity, rootedness, rigidity". (p. 83)

Thurley opens by providing a genealogy for this opposition, beginning with Hippocrates, finding Hardy's literary ancestry in "the great comic writers of the Humours tradition" (p. 5), and more immediately in the Brontës, Melville and Scott. Thurley sees the opposition evident in *Desperate Remedies*, and traces its evolution through the novels to *Jude*, where "the nervous and the statuesque fight it out to the finish" (p. 129). Clearly Thurley finds the typological view most exciting for the way it has led him to read the major novels, and his argument would have been more compelling had he concentrated on *The Mayor*, *Tess* and *Jude*, with briefer or passing attention to the earlier books—where often the most interesting part of his commentary is not dependent on his main thesis. For example, the talk of the connection between dancing and the occult, beginning in the chapter on *Under the Greenwood Tree*, is related to but not generated by the "type" thesis.

The thesis itself has the attraction of simplicity, and also an evident validity. So evident, in fact, that one wonders why Thurley protests so much in setting it up. Indeed, as he goes on, in the opening chapter particularly, what is immediately acceptable as a given assumption becomes more dubious, and more questions are begged than settled: the problem of the relation of humours to archetypes, for instance, and such complications of literary tradition as Gothic elements in nineteenth-century fiction, and the romance prototypes for Scott and the Brontës, suggest themselves as needing to be considered. Thurley might have got away with more arbitrary limits to his definitions: the limits he does draw, however, appear artificial.

The main application of this notion of character in Hardy is structural. Thurley groups *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders* as pentagonal novels, each depending on five contrasting characters; and then sees Hardy basing the tragic novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, on a psychological triad. In essence, he sees these novels as distinguished by "the more intense concentration given to fewer characters and their relationships" (p. 129), and also by the way that each protagonist is dominated by passion (in a sense which emerges from the presentation of Hardy's total psychological scheme). He adds a further claim that "They are also archetypal characters in whose lives and deaths certain eternally recurrent human experiences are rehearsed" (p. 129). That "They are also . . ." glides over the question of how archetypes and morphological types can be seen to relate, and is typical of the assumptions and oversimplifications which mark much of the discussion.

The amount of repetition and reiteration in this book consorts oddly with Thurley's tendency to throw off a provocative assertion and proceed to ignore it. Such assertions provide some of the most valuable yet irritating parts of the book: in the comments on "the beautiful vicar syndrome" (p. 49, though half-stated earlier), on Hardy's unique obsession with the beauty of English women (p. 70), and on Hardy's world as non-procreative (p. 168). Thurley's forte, I think, is in such assertion: hence my feeling that he would come across more convincingly in a briefer compass, when a reader would be left gasping at the illumination and audacity, and not exasperated by reiteration of less interesting matter.

Laird's tone and attitude are quite different. His generalizations are not the outcome of a brilliant synthetic flash, but of painstaking scrutiny and rumination. Like Thurley, Laird keeps his end firmly in view:

My main concern in the following pages is to trace the gradual evolution of Thomas Hardy's famous novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, from the earliest stage of its composition in manuscript form, dating from at least as early as October 1888, until the publication of the quasi-definitive version of the text in the Macmillan "Wessex Edition" of 1912.

There is a meticulousness in qualification here—"at least as early as . . .", "the quasi-definitive . . . 'Wessex Edition'"—which is the most evident manifestation of the complexity of the material with which Laird is working. His account of the many and varied processes of change in *Tess* is lucidly presented, and is informed by a thorough acquaintance with other discussions relevant to *Tess*. The authorial persona, however, is a modest one, and only gradually do the implications of the phases of demonstration clinch into interpretative assertions. Indeed there is a danger that in his scrupulousness Laird might sell short the real critical originality of some of his observations. He suggests what he sees as the advantages (and limitations) of his "genetic" approach in a characteristically discreet way.

The genetic approach adopted in this study possesses three important advantages over the more traditional, impressionistic approach to the text of Hardy's novel. First, by affording the reader the opportunity of studying the author's creative processes it eventually leads to a surer and deeper understanding of the meaning of the definitive text. Secondly, it throws considerable light on the reasons for the uneven quality of the writing in the definitive text, helping the reader to perceive the causes of both strengths and weaknesses in a novel which, in spite of its deserved reputation as Hardy's masterpiece, remains a singular mixture of artistry and clumsiness. Thirdly, the approach reveals the existence of a significant dichotomy between Hardy the novelist and Hardy the exegetical writer—between the noble desire for candour and sincerity which characterizes Hardy's literary aspirations and achievements in *Tess* and the obfuscations and inaccuracies to be found among his comments on the circumstances surrounding its composition and publication. (pp. 4-5)

I quote this lengthy passage partly in order to be able to say that Laird truly exploits the advantages. Moreover, I think he avoids a potential difficulty, that in giving such an account of a novel, in explaining how the novel came to be as it is, a writer may find himself justifying its being as it is. While it is not possible to be too dogmatic without access to all the evidence on which a case is based, I do not think Laird is vulnerable to a charge of *post hoc* rationalization.

This is not to advocate a genetic study of texts as a necessary scholarly pre-requisite to any critical activity. What I would stress is the value of *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"* in sharpening our awareness and

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understanding of the Wessex Edition text by showing us Hardy at work, with the pressures of moral opinion and publishing conventions affecting the creative imagination. I would also protest that I have not been trapped by the reviewers' clichés I mentioned earlier, into elevating Laird while discounting Thurley. However, in returning to the two books, I have found that while reading Laird continually provides a new insight, reading Thurley continually poses queries or qualifications.

To consider some instances of how each critic isolates and explains phenomena in *Tess*. This is Thurley on the nature of Tess's relationships with Alec and Angel: "Tess has Eustacia's heavy-limbed sensuality, though in a sublimated form. This ethereality—one of the qualities no reader can have missed in Tess—is precisely what distinguishes her from Alec d'Urberville, with whom she nevertheless shares a physicality entirely absent from Angel Clare. This is the central crux of the novel". (pp. 174-5). Laird's reading of the balance of the relationships is basically similar, though examining at greater length the mixture of sensual and ethereal in Tess, and similarly providing a more detailed account of Angel and Alec, both of whom he sees as unconvincing characterizations. But Laird's discussion of Angel and Alec (pp. 131ff.) does seriously qualify the glibness of Thurley's summary.

A more complicated example localizes in the seduction scene (chapter 11). Here is Thurley:

Hardy never at any point mitigates the coarseness of Alec d'Urberville, and at the moment of seduction, insists upon his total unworthiness of Tess's fineness of texture. (She is "sensitive as gossamer".) Yet it is not possible to accept Tess's seduction as other than the ancient myth—the loss of sexual innocence, the Fall—and this entails our acknowledging her own acquiescence in the event. (p. 163)

Now Laird's view is different. He quotes from chapter 14 the comment of a field woman watching Tess with her baby:

"A little more than persuading had to do wi' the coming o't, I reckon. There were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in The Chase; and it mid ha' gone hard wi' a certain party if folks had come along."

and claims "It is this passage, more than any other in the novel, which conveys to the reader the notion that the defloration of Tess should be termed an act of rape rather than a seduction" (p. 177). Such a significance could—and should—be attributed to the passage by a reader acquainted only with the text of the Wessex Edition (though the "rape or seduction?" verdict is to be considered not only on the evidence of that passage: the whole build-up of erotic atmosphere in the Chaseborough dance, itself suppressed from the printed text until 1912, should be recognized too. And the ominous use of red and white imagery . . .). However Laird's familiarity with the stages by which that text emerged enables him to reinforce his point that Hardy stressed Tess's resistance by showing that the interpolation in chapter 14 was added in 1892, when Hardy also made changes in chapter 11, removing suggestions that there had been no audible disturbance, and deleting a passage in which Alec plied Tess with alcohol to make her succumb more easily. Some of Laird's material also qualifies Thurley's claim that Hardy never mitigates Alec's coarseness.

But more is at issue than the "rape or seduction?" question. Thurley does not spell out his grounds for reading the passage in terms of the Fall, and while I think he is certainly right to insist that Tess's fall has more than individual significance, he seriously simplifies Hardy's presentation

by so limiting its significance. One of the oddities of the presentation of the union of Alec and Tess (in the last paragraphs of chapter 11)—a union prepared for from an early stage of the novel—is that it proceeds largely by questions. By this means Hardy avoids what his readers may have found an offensive explicitness about physical events; but there is artistic justification for his decision in that the emphasis falls on how the event is to be interpreted—and it is the significance of the action, rather than the action itself, which concerns him. It might be noted that the most explicit account of what is happening is in the allusion to d'Urbervilles of yore asserting their *droit de seigneur*, and it is precisely the attempt to establish d'Urberville ancestry that has led Tess into Alec's clutches. Thus particular and potent aspects of Tess's plight are also involved in the focus on universal questions of Fate, order and design, questions which the novel as a whole insistently frames. It is irrelevant to complain that the novel fails to provide answers to these questions: Hardy's answer is that existence is a riddle, and that man can survive more readily by acknowledging the apparent arbitrariness and cruelty which constitute the question.

Once again, I see Thurley as disregarding complexities of the text; and will labour the point further by invoking a prejudice of my own about Tess. This concerns the terms of the title, an explication of which unfolds much of the thematic tension of the novel, and lends support to the by now standard claim that Hardy was a deliberate and meticulous craftsman.

The full title is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles A Pure Woman*. Now, to name a novel for its protagonist is not unusual, though Hardy had done it before only in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and was to do it only once more, in *Jude the Obscure*. In the case of Tess and *Tess . . .*, the centrality of the heroine is stressed, particularly by virtue of the form in which her name is given—for she is not known, in the novel, as "Tess of the d'Urbervilles". The form of her name is at times in question, not only in the d'Urberville/Durbeyfield corruption, but also for example when she rejects Angel's calling her Artemis and Demeter (chapter 20) and when Angel searches Sandbourne for Mrs Clare (chapter 55). The very form of the name can be seen to project the wider issues of Tess's identity, of the various elements she embodies.

Hardy went through several changes of mind—Cis, Love, Rose-Mary—before deciding on his heroine's name. In settling on Tess, he chose a name meaning "carrying ears of corn" or "the reaper",¹ a choice which evokes the native rural tradition, and the sense of natural fecundity (in a cyclical progression), which are central in the novel.

In the epithet of the *d'Urbervilles*, the important theme of heredity and heritage, of individuals as part of larger traditions, is intimated. The theme is worked out largely through irony and paradox: to give a brief instance, Tess really does have nobility and dignity—partly natural?—despite the parody of a nobleman presented in her father's drunken delusions of grandeur, and the different kind of parody of a nobleman in the *nouveau riche* Alec d'Urberville, whose family has bought the old name. The connection of the Durbeyfields with the upstart Stoke d'Urbervilles was not part of Hardy's original conception, and as Laird shows, much of his revision is directed towards developing the pervasive significance of the

¹ So defined in Charlotte M. Yonge's *History of Christian Names* (1863). Hardy had a copy of this work. See Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (1971), pp. 269, 403.

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d'Urberville theme. Laird's account of this development is I think the most valuable part of *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"*: apart from large applications, like the encroaching of mechanization, he relates features of Tess's personality like her passivity and her occasional violence to the d'Urberville blight (pp. 114-5).

So much for the main title. But the subtitle, *A Pure Woman*, is crucial in its ambiguity. On the one hand, *pure* conveys the sense of Tess as entirely female, a kind of total natural emanation of womanliness. As such, she cannot (indeed, should not) deny natural impulses, like those which draw her to Angel Clare. On the other hand, *pure* has the obvious sense of chastity, invoking a moral code which can be (and in Tess's case, is) at odds with the law of nature. I think Hardy is concerned to show the conflict of these different demands of purity, and further, that the generation of such tensions, the refusal to let a situation exist in only one set of terms, is fundamental to Hardy's presentation of Tess.

Even now, the title-page is not exhausted, for *Tess of the d'Urbervilles A Pure Woman* has been *Faithfully Presented by Thomas Hardy*. Why the stress on fidelity of representation? Primarily as a reminder that presentation involves a presenter, and cannot be entirely neutral: there is, I think, an oblique defence of *Tess* by an implied assertion of some of Hardy's own ideas about the writing of fiction, especially his conviction that art must embody the artist's "idiosyncratic mode of regard".²

I have briefly rehearsed this view of *Tess* in order to conclude by saying that Laird's book not only strengthened my conviction about the emphases and methods of the novel, but enriched my appreciation of them, at the same time making me more dissatisfied with the kinds of generalization Thurley offers, and especially with such assertions as "Hardy's novels are about relationships, not man in a cosmic void, against a natural background, or unsettled by a changing society, but involved with other men and women" (p. 21; cf. p. 142). Things would have been much easier for Hardy as a man and a writer had his view of personal relationships been quite the one Thurley attributes him, but the novels and poetry would not have been informed by so tortuous and compelling a "mode of regard".

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2 See e.g. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (1928, 1930; one-volume edition 1962): "Art consists in so depicting the common events of life as to bring out the features which illustrate the author's idiosyncratic mode of regard" (p. 225); "Art is a disproportioning . . . of realities . . ." (p. 229).