

from Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Fiction* (1974)

There is a famous stopping-place for critics of the novel in a letter which Henry James once wrote to the young Hugh Walpole:

Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance – saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding, and that makes one ashamed of an art capable of such degradations. Tolstoi and Dostoevsky are fluid puddings, though not tasteless, because the amount of their own minds and souls in solution in the broth gives it savour and flavour, thanks to the strong, rank quality of their genius and their experience. But there are all sorts of things to be said of them, and in particular that we see how great a vice is their lack of composition, their defiance of economy and architecture, directly they are emulated and imitated; *then*, as subjects of emulation, models, they quite give themselves away. There is nothing so deplorable as a work of art with a *leak*.

A famous passage, in that it has not only given sharper definition to our understanding of James's sense of form in fiction, but it has been operative in creating an idiom for our discussion of fiction in general. 'Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves. . .', the shaping idea is there, driving in the wedge hard and with ceremony, between art and the miscellany of daily experience, and seeing in form something to which justice can only be done in terms of physical possession. From this, it is but a short step to a sense of fiction as an organic whole, 'all one and continuous, like any other organism. . .'. Homogeneous in its nature, conscious of its artifice, consistent in its point of view, these are the marks by which we come to know and to talk about a James novel, and we have to take them all the more readily because James has himself indicated their significance. James, we might say, has not only written his novels, he has built into the writing of them how they should be read. The Prefaces are the formal extension of a process, already implicit in the novels themselves; they have, we feel, *already* been perfectly 'read' by their author, and the awareness of that reading becomes part of our experience of his fiction.

Where the Prefaces, together with the letters, have made their distinctive contribution is in the uncovering of some of the general assumptions upon which the particular readings are based, they have arranged for a set of novels to illustrate the art of fiction. And that art has, of course, been a pervasive presence in the general criticism of fiction in recent decades, a presence, even when it is not being consciously adverted to. Consider for instance E. M. Forster's sharp, influential book, *Aspects of the Novel*. Behind those seemingly artless chapter titles, 'Story', 'Plot', 'People', and so on, there is a Jamesian progress, as the postulant in search of the mysteries of fiction leaves behind him the flats of story, and arrives finally in the high ranges where pattern can be revealed and elusive rhythms are heard. In his own distinctive and unassuming way, Forster too reinforces the idea of fiction as an organic whole — his final analogue is with music — and these 'aspects of the novel' have become so much part of the current coin of criticism that, in citing James and Forster, we are only citing moments of influence, of persuasive coherence, not describing an argument consciously pursued.

When we come to look at Hardy's novels through the eyes of someone writing under that influence, this is how they appear:

James's rules were not cramping; they had as their object the liberation of his genius, and the extent of his liberation is best seen when we compare him to his great contemporary, Thomas Hardy. Hardy wrote as he pleased, just as any popular novelist does, quite unaware of the particular problems of his art, and yet it is Hardy who gives the impression of being cramped, of being forced into melodramatic laocoon attitudes, so that we begin to appreciate his novels only for the passages where the poet subdues the novelist. [Greene, "The Lesson of the Master," *The Lost Childhood*]

For Graham Greene the lesson of the master has been ignored by Hardy, a false notion of freedom has been aimed at, craft has had to give way to personal assertion. The result is that internal harmonies have been destroyed, and a deep divisiveness has been set up within the fiction, which can be described as a conflict between the poet and the novelist, or — more tellingly, perhaps — between the novelist and the sage.

It is not hard to see what it is in a Hardy novel which lends itself to this criticism. From a Jamesian point of view, not only has the novel developed a leak, it is distinctly porous. There is a number of quite definable interests running through it: the story-teller whose tales have the forceful simplicities of the ballad—writer, the social historian evoking and criticising the radical changes overtaking the rural economy of the south-west of England in the second half of the nineteenth century, the reader of Darwin, Mill and Schopenhauer, recording his troubled reflections. There are other interests too, but perhaps it is these that catch the eye most readily, and they catch it because they seem in no particular hurry to resolve themselves into an imaginative whole.

Nevertheless, separate and distinctive as these interests are, they do not seem to compromise, much less to threaten, the unity and coherence of the novels. The world of Hardy's novels is as undeniably present as the world of Henry James. Equally undeniably, it would seem to be constructed on very different principles, principles which make us think again about what we mean by the unity of a novel, by the presence of ideas in a novel, by the relationship between the author and his work. Put bluntly, we have to ask ourselves, what kind of novel did Hardy write? In attempting to describe it, we will have to ask what fresh emphasis will be given to those elements in our reading which Jamesian practice and precept has entered only in the margins of those critical accounts we customarily render.

If there is one element more than any other which has fallen on hard times, it is the element of story. 'When the story of a novel is mentioned it is as a preliminary ritual, rather like an acrobat hastily Unrolling the mat upon which he is to perform his act. This is a pity because 'the story' is central to our experience of reading, and most novel readers warm to Wilde's observation, 'This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last', however subtle, oblique and elegant its communication may be. What I am contending for is not that the critic should devote more of his time to relating the story, but rather underlining the fact that the experience of reading a novel is that of an unfolding process, a process which has implications not just for the psychology of reading, but for literary criticism. Precisely because it is a process, a novel looks and feels different at page 200 from how it looked and felt at page 100, whereas our methods of criticism incline to treat a novel as if it were a series of numbered paragraphs simultaneously present in the reader's mind. Every novel is only gradually exposed, and then it gradually recedes, as Percy Lubbock reminds us in the salutary opening paragraph of *The Craft of Fiction*:

To grasp the shadowy and fantasmal form of a book, to hold it fast, to turn it over and survey it at leisure – that is the effort of a critic of books, and it is perpetually defeated. Nothing, no power, will keep a book steady and motionless before us, so that we may have time to examine its shape and design. As quickly as we read, it melts and shifts in the memory.

In an attempt to support our fading memory we prefabricate a scaffolding upon which we can reconstruct our recollections, a scaffolding defined in terms of plot, character, setting, and so on. What we have also to remember is that these precipitates came to us gradually, as a process, and in isolating them, we should recall, as a complementary need, the dynamic which made them present to us.

These generalisations, which could apply to fiction in general, have a particular force when applied to Hardy, because for him the story, the process of revelation, is central to his fictional enterprise. His imaginative purposes require a heightened sense of anticipation and involvement, that peculiar kind of total involvement which is so much a part of a story's spell, and which was well described by a reader of *Jane Eyre* when that novel first appeared:

We took up *Jane Eyre* one winter's evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning.' [Wm George Clark, *Fraser's*, Dec. 1849]

Hardy would have relished a similar reaction to his own novels.

While we must start by indicating this sense of involvement as a necessary preliminary in establishing the importance of story, it would not translate itself into a matter of critical interest, unless it raised an issue which affected Hardy's outlook as a novelist. Story, or more precisely plot, is mimetic of Hardy's metaphysic; in the plot the novelist makes, he finds an analogue both for the plots men make for themselves, and for the plots over which they seem to have no control. Hardy's ostentatious use of coincidence is the well-lighted junction where the lines of these various plots converge. Again and again his plot encourages us to ponder its links or its gaps, so that we can become aware of a process which is both leading us inevitably onwards, and yet is exerting a palpable design upon us. The effect is rather like that of being in a maze which involves us in getting out, and yet impresses us with how that exit will be effected. It is this duality of effect which is present in Hardy's references to fiction as being 'a precise transcript of ordinary life', but also 'a tale exceptional enough to justify its telling', and 'the uncommonness must be in the events not in the characters'.⁴ In other words, the pressure of the design is such that the reader is made continually aware that it is a story that he is being told, it has its own authenticity, its own fabrication: it is 'once upon a time. . . Consider the manner of our first acquaintance with *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Tess*:

A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight. . . .

One evening of late summer, before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span. . . .

On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward. . .

These opening sentences all catch the classic cadence of the storyteller, the isolating precision of place and time, going along with a generalised expansiveness, which will ensure our involvement as the design is gradually disclosed, an involvement which secures us as willing accomplices in the creation of 'make-believe'. What gives Hardy's sense of story its critical significance is that it is integral to his way of thinking, it silhouettes his metaphysic.

It is important that we grasp the dramatic existence of that metaphysic, and look at the way in which the ideas are present in Hardy's fiction. However much we may feel we want to italicise the ideas, they are an inevitable part of a developing text, we come to them in the process of a particular narrative, and they take their place within that narrative. Nevertheless, their relationship can vary considerably. I would like to illustrate this by looking at two places in the Wessex novels, which have become something of anthology pieces in any discussion of Hardy's ideas. The first is from *Jude* and occurs early in the novel when Jude has been dismissed by the farmer for allowing the birds to eat his corn:

Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. Nature's logic was too horrid for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony. As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering he perceived. All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it.

If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man.

What we notice about this passage is the shifting relationship of the narrator to his protagonist. It begins with the narrator's sentiments being freely on loan to Jude; 'events did not rhyme quite as he had thought', the tone is that of someone who has had more experience of the ways of the world, and if Jude is 'sickened' we feel the narrator is also. But then the voice of the eleven-year-old boy begins to be heard, 'as you had felt when you were little', and the sentence concludes with that rather hasty, protective phrase, 'he perceived'. By that time the shift in feeling between narrator and protagonist has begun, the general indictment of the way things are has become submerged in the particularities of Jude's own self-pity, the narrator is aware of his obligations to this boy in this place, a boy recently clouted by an angry farmer for not doing the job he had paid him to do. The feeling is now completely the boy's, 'If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a

man.’ The narrator has faded behind this intellectual Peter Pan, Jude has re-assumed possession of his dramatic imagination, and general reflections are returned to an individual mind. The shift of feeling, intimated in this sentence, is completed in the next, when Jude takes over completely: ‘Then, like the natural boy, he forgot his despondency, and sprang up.’ It would be as mistaken to read the passage in terms of that last remark, as it would be to read it in the spirit of the first, to counter a pessimistic outlook on the narrator’s part, with an optimistic one.

What such a passage makes clear, and it is a representative one, is the continual dialectic of feeling that is operative between the narrator and his narrative. There is a constant impulse towards an inclusiveness of view, not through any calculating rhetorical strategy, but simply in the instinctual process of writing out the scene Hardy is moved to a point where his own voice has to be heard, then on to a further point, where he feels the challenging tug of his narrative, which, in its turn, will give way again and so on. The effect of this process is to make any extraction of ideas, however insistently they seek to claim our attention, false to the manner of their existence, which is a manner created out of a tension which is sometimes the tension between the narrative and the narrator.

It is the tension within the narrative itself that lies behind the second of my illustrations, perhaps the most quoted instance of the distorting influence of ideas in the Wessex novels. It is from an early chapter of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* when Tess, accompanied by her young brother Abraham, sets out on the fateful journey in the early hours of the morning to deliver the beehives. Tess falls into a silent mood:

Abraham talked on, rather for the pleasure of utterance than for audition, so that his sister’s abstraction was of no account.

The renewed subject, which seemed to have impregnated the whole family, filled Tess with impatience.

‘Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?’

‘Which do we live on — a splendid one or a blighted one?’

‘A blighted one.’

‘Is it like that *really*, Tess?’ said Abraham

I have had to give a rather extended context for this episode, because it is necessary to see Tess’s meditations on ‘a blighted universe’ as occurring in a particular scene where Abraham has his own part to play. My purpose in looking at this passage is not so much to absolve it from criticism — the usual form such criticism takes being that Hardy is burdening Tess with authorial reflections which she cannot support — as to suggest that these reflections are more obliquely authorial than is supposed. If we hear the author’s voice more clearly than Tess’s in her replies to Abraham, then I suggest the stridency is due not to ‘the ideas’ themselves, but to the place where they occur in the novel. If these same meditations had occurred not in chapter 4 but, let us say, in Chapter ~ during Tess’s stay at Flintcomb Ash, then we would have had little difficulty in assimilating them. We would have been able to do that because we feel that by that time Tess’s experience might well have prompted such reflections. The reader could find room to manoeuvre his judgement in the gap between the narrator and his narrative. But, I suggest, that gap is present in the passage as it now occurs.

Tess’s reflections are accompanied at every point by Abraham’s, and, while he is not of course offering a contrary view, he is establishing, for author and reader, a sense of perspective. It is a perspective which creates a tone of gentle speculation, caught first in the whimsy of the spy-glass which would draw the stars nearer than Nettlecombe-Tout, then in the wryly humorous rejoinder, ‘‘Tis very unlucky that we didn’t pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of ‘em’, and finally quite directly in ‘‘Is it like that *really*, Tess?’ said Abraham.’ The effect is not to counter Tess’s remarks, but to give them a context where they can emerge as wonderings rather than as conclusions.

In these two passages from *Jude* and *Tess* I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which the ideas are present in Hardy’s text, ideas for which no claim is made that they are dramatically embodied within a particular character, but which are rather created out of a tension either within the narrative itself as in the case of *Tess*, or, as in the case of *Jude*, between the narrator and the narrative. This is not a conflict, but a tension, because Hardy’s kind of fiction dramatises a third—person consciousness, in which experience, and reflection

upon experience, become an integral part of his imaginative act. The novel as an unfolding process, which I described earlier in terms of story, can in this way be seen to extend into its metaphysical structuring, so that the implied author exists neither as a mediator between his characters and the reader, nor as a dramatised consciousness taking a place with other characters, but as a distinctive presence existing alongside the characters, undergoing the same experiences as they undergo, reflecting upon them as they do.

The effect of this is that whereas in a James novel we feel the work has already found its finest reader in the author, in Hardy the reading is still in process, the narrator's reading being only as sharp and as fitful as our own. The novel lies open before us. It is this openness, this continuity of feeling which the author feels for the characters of his own creation, that gives us, in our turn, a continuity of feeling for the author, so that Hardy criticism often seems impelled to strike a note of personal testimony. For instance, we find Irving Howe in the middle of a good, but thoroughly orthodox chapter on *The Return of the Native*, appearing to feel that to do justice to the effect the novel makes he must turn aside from the main argument, and move into italics with the sentence '*here is a man who knows, who has seen and flit.*' And more strikingly, largely because it happens to a critic whose practice is not associated with this tone, we find Dr. Leavis some years ago concluding a detailed analysis of one of Hardy's poems, 'After a Journey', with the remark: 'It is a poem that we recognize to have come directly out of life; it could only be written by a man who had the experience of a life to remember back through. ... It is a case in which we know from the art what the man was like; we can be sure, that is, what personal qualities we should have found to admire in Hardy if we could have known him.' Remarks such as these suggest how keenly the presence of the author is felt as a determining element in the quality of the work, and it is this transparent authorial self which gives unity and coherence to the diversity of impressions and the oscillations of feeling which characterise the novels.

Why we should have a continuity of feeling with the author, such as he, in his turn, has with his characters, is seen in a fine remark made by Virginia Woolf:

The novels are full of inequalities ... there is always about them a little blur of unconsciousness, that halo of freshness and margin of the unexpressed which often produce the most profound sense of satisfaction. It is as if Hardy were not quite aware of what he did, as if his consciousness held more than he could produce, and he left it for his readers to make out his full meaning and to supplement it from their own experience.'

Reading Hardy then becomes a way of reading ourselves, and we feel a summons both to enter the world of story and to understand what that story means.

Hardy himself understood this well when he described his novels as 'a series of seemings'. The notion of series brings with it an emphasis on the unfolding process of event; the notion of seemings the effort to find within the series a longer perspective, a hint of pattern. Taken as a whole, the phrase implies a seeking for a truth whose form is always provisional, whose dynamic is the tension between the story—teller and the sage, the author and the reader, a tension which, for Hardy, was the essential condition for the imaginative validity of the quest.