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PETER D. SMITH
MASTER OF LETTERS CANDIDATE 1967
ABSTRACT OF A THESIS ENTITLED
"CONTEMPORARY JUDGMENT ON THE GROWTH OF
HARDY'S REPUTATION AS A NOVELIST BETWEEN
1871 AND 1881"

Thomas Hardy's first eight published novels appeared between 1871 and 1881, and were extensively reviewed by the London newspapers and journals of opinion. The thesis is based mainly upon one hundred and twenty-six such reviews.

Comparison of these reviews with the general standards employed in novel-reviewing and with the reception of eight contemporary works reveals the 'ordinariness' of Hardy's early books. His settings may be unusual in some cases, his style slightly bizarre, and some of his characters peculiar, but, unlike Meredith or James, he is not seen as blazing any new trails; unlike George Eliot he is not considered a writer of 'literature'; nor is he regarded as using the novel to convey a view of life, as did Gissing or Samuel Butler. Rather, the reviewers deal with him as they deal with Trollope or William Black, as one who writes fairly straightforwardly about fairly ordinary people and events.

It is therefore not surprising to find some opinions that run counter to modern criticism: A Pair of Blue Eyes highly praised, The Trumpet-Major described as his masterpiece, The Return of the Native confusing the reviewers and arousing hostility, and even warm compliments for The Hand of Ethelberta and A Laodicean.

Many reviewers were nevertheless perspicacious enough to realize that Hardy has extraordinary gifts: his ability to describe rural life and natural phenomena, his profound understanding of women's hearts, his skill as a plot-maker. The reviewers generally admired and encouraged him at this stage of his development, and, in spite of finding the reviews confusing and even painful, Hardy may have had cause to be grateful to them, for they must have helped to create the following that enabled him to devote himself to his career as a novelist and to his calling to be a poet.

CONTEMPORARY JUDGMENT ON THE
GROWTH OF HARDY'S
REPUTATION AS A NOVELIST
BETWEEN 1871 AND 1881

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PETER D. SMITH

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
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1967

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PREFACE

The studies of which this thesis is the culmination were begun in October 1963. They have involved searching and reading the files of Victorian periodicals in many places: the Durham University Library, the Newcastle Public Library, the Birmingham Reference Library, the Bodleian Library, the Oxford Union Library, the Library of the University of California at Berkeley, and the British Museum Newspaper Library, Colindale.

I am indebted to many friends, colleagues and correspondents for criticism, advice or assistance, and would like to acknowledge the help of the following: Edmund Blunden, David Carnegie, R. G. Cox, Kenneth Gibson, L. T. Hergenhan, B. W. Jackson, J. D. Jump, John Paterson, and Richard Little Purdy. I am particularly grateful for the warm encouragement and wise counsel I have received from Professor Roger Sharrock and Professor R. A. Foakes at every stage during the preparation of this work.

It is appropriate that I should acknowledge my debt to the authorities at McMaster University who both granted me leave of absence so that I might attend the University of Durham and begin this study, and assisted me with a substantial grant towards the cost of buying photocopies of many of the 246 reviews with which I have worked.

I am glad to refer also to the assistance I received at the Dorset County Museum, where, on a January day before a roaring fire and with Hardy's scrapbook on my knee, I first sensed the excitement of trying to reconstruct the past.

The librarians of the following periodicals have given me assistance in my attempts (usually fruitless) to trace the authors of anonymous reviews: Blackwood's, Daily Telegraph (and for the Morning Post), Illustrated London News, John Bull, New Statesman (for the Athenaeum), Observer, Scotsman, Spectator, Sunday Times, and Times.

My final and most heartfelt acknowledgement is to my wife, who has brought home to me the meaning of a phrase which I have often read in other prefaces but which I never before understood - "without whom this work would never have been completed".

INTRODUCTION

This study of Thomas Hardy's reputation in his own time is based upon one hundred and twenty-six reviews, published in thirty-five London periodicals between April 1, 1871 and July 19, 1882, of his first eight novels. These reviews, a very few comments recorded in The Life of Thomas Hardy,¹ and inferences to be drawn from certain events in his career, are practically the only signposts the modern reader has to guide him to an appreciation of how Hardy's contemporaries looked upon his work at this period in his career.

The student may wish it could be otherwise; he may recall the words of Professor George Ford in the preface to his distinguished study of Dickens:²

The conventional history of an author's reputation is often based entirely upon a study of reviews. In such a tidy concentration of the evidence there is obvious value, yet the results are sometimes rather dull and even misleading. What follows is based in part upon reviews but also upon diaries, autobiographies, letters, memoirs, and critical essays;

but no matter how much he may wish to follow Professor Ford's example, the student who is concerned with the beginnings of

1 F. E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928, London, 1962 (hereinafter referred to as the Life).

2 Dickens and his Readers, Princeton, 1955.

Hardy's career will find himself frustrated by the almost total absence of any reference to the novelist and his work in other people's diaries, autobiographies, letters, memoirs etc. It is an utterly different story from that of Dickens, and the fact must be faced that if this generation is to know anything about what novel-readers of the 1870's thought of Hardy it must, practically speaking, rely almost completely upon what reviewers said about him.

There is no question but that Hardy himself was concerned to know what reviewers said about him. References to particular reviews, especially of his early novels, are scattered through the Life; so are indications in the remarks of others that he tried to take seriously whatever suggestions were made to him about his writing. He may have regretted it later,³ but it is clear that at the time he was anxious to know the reactions of those who read his novels; the Life records how the request for a successor to Far from the Madding Crowd

was the means of urging Hardy into the unfortunate course of hurrying forward a further production before he was aware of what there had been of value

3 Robert Graves records a visit to Hardy (in 1920) in the course of which Hardy made it clear that "he regarded professional critics as parasites, no less noxious than autograph-hunters, wished the world rid of them, and also regretted having listened to them as a young man." There was "another of Hardy's attacks on the critics at breakfast." Goodbye to All That, London, 1929, p. 271 of the 1957 edition.

in his previous one: before learning, that is, not only what had attracted the public, but what was of true and genuine substance on which to build a career as a writer with a real literary message. For mere popularity he cared little ... but having now to live by the pen ... he had to consider popularity.⁴

The remarkable phrase "before he was aware of what there had been of value in his previous one" gives as vivid an indication as anything could of Hardy's attitude towards his work at that time. The Life abounds in references to Hardy's having become a novelist if not by accident at least as a second choice and somewhat against his better judgment: his relations with a succession of publishers at this point in his career clearly show how uncertain he was in his own mind of what was "of value" in what he had written, and how ready he was to listen to other people's judgments, and to try to act upon them.⁵ Among these other people, the reviewers in

4 p. 102.

5 There is, for example, the famous letter to Leslie Stephen, given on page 100 of the Life, that contains the phrase that scandalizes those who are concerned with the novel as a self-conscious and disciplined art form: "The truth is that I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. Perhaps I may have higher aims some day ... but for the present, circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial."

the newspapers and periodicals were bound to have a place: not only did they guide public opinion but, in an important sense, they reflected it as well.⁶ They were, or could be assumed to be, experienced and widely read in fiction to an extent that Hardy himself was not; for a novelist who is writing to please his audience rather than to please himself, their opinion was bound to be of some weight - at least until, as Hardy doubtless found, their opinions varied so much that he was presented with so much conflicting advice as to make meaningless any attempt to follow it.

That Hardy saw a good many of the reviews written about his novels is clear from the scrapbooks now in the Dorset County Museum. It is evident that either Hardy himself or his wife took seriously the matter of preserving his reviews: in most instances where a review is printed on both sides of a page two copies of the periodical had been bought so that the whole review might be pasted in the scrapbook. The search was extensive - there are ten different reviews of Far from the Madding Crowd, thirteen of The Return of the Native, and (by this

6 One occasionally comes across a touching instance of Hardy's naivety in these matters. He records that, in a conversation with Stephen, "speaking to him of a remarkably generous review of the previous book of mine [A Pair of Blue Eyes] I asked him if in such a case one ought not to write and thank the reviewer." F. W. Maitland, The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen, London, 1906, p. 276.

his publishers were sending press clippings) eighteen of The Trumpet-Major.⁷ In all, for the eight novels with which this study is concerned, the Hardys collected sixty-nine reviews;⁸ another fifty-four were found by searching through the files of London newspapers and periodicals; three more were discovered in Weber's bibliography.⁹ The whole collection of one hundred and twenty-six constitute a very substantial body of opinion, amounting to well over a hundred thousand words.

These reviews, of course, tell the reader a good deal about Hardy, but they tell him even more about Hardy's audience. They may help to indicate the limits within which he wrote, the conventions he was expected to observe, and the demands he had to satisfy if he wanted to achieve success. They also go beyond this and, taken together, present a statement about Victorian taste in general, indicating its

7 That the scrapbook-keeping was not meticulous is also clear: there are two copies of several reviews, and several instances of a wrong date being written against a clipping. The writing in the scrapbook, except for very occasional comments (more frequent in the book devoted to poetry than in the "novel" book), is not Hardy's. Perhaps the keeping of the book began as a labour of love on the part of his first wife.

8 This figure does not include reviews of second editions.

9 C. J. Weber, The First Hundred Years of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1940, Waterville, Maine, 1942.

variety as well as its rigidity in certain areas. Again, the reviews confirm the impression, that may be gained from Stang or Graham,¹⁰ of the comparatively unsophisticated approach that most Victorians seem to have taken towards the novel. They show essentially how small were the expectations of Victorian readers, and how limited their awareness of what the novel was capable of achieving. Finally, the reviews offer an occasional insight into Hardy's achievement which provokes the student to look at one or other of his books in a new light.

In order to show more easily Hardy's position in relation to his times, this study includes two other sections. Part One is made up of two chapters in which the 'critical atmosphere' is described for the years at each end of the decade with which this study is concerned. These chapters try to indicate, in a general way, the limitations, conventions, demands and expectations of the professional reviewers, and to describe the altar, as it were, on which each new novel was offered up. It is important that the intention of these chapters should be understood. They are not to be seen as attempting the same things as the studies by Stang or Graham, both of whose works are clearly much more wide-ranging and profound than these seventy-three pages. They are, rather,

¹⁰ Kenneth Graham, English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900, Oxford, 1965; Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870, New York and London, 1959.

the description of what one person found when he read virtually every novel review that was published in the three most influential journals of the day in two specific years in the nineteenth century. This preliminary attempt at discovery, concluded before the author had read Stang and written up before he had read Graham, provided him with first-hand knowledge which he could not have obtained in any other way. Both Stang and Graham summarize, select, paraphrase, and thereby give a full picture of many aspects of the criticism of the novel. They did not set out to convey what it was like to be a Victorian reader, waiting for Saturday to arrive so that he might know what to order next from Mudie's; their purpose was not to re-create the tedium of reading hundreds of inconsequential reviews of inconsequential novels. Yet it is this that the student of the reputation of a new author has to try to do, so as to have as good an idea as possible of the context in which to place the review of Desperate Remedies that appeared in the Athenaeum on April 1, 1871, and all the others that followed. Having made the search and, to some extent at least, re-created the context, it seemed best to try to describe it rather than to summarize the summarizers.

Part Three consists of a series of essays on the critical reception of eight other books published in the same years as Hardy's novels. Every major novelist writing during the

decade is represented, except for Disraeli; the collection includes a first novel (Gissing's) as well as works written by their authors at the height of their powers; and it includes the work of an author who in his day rivalled Hardy for popularity but who is now forgotten and ignored - William Black. The Gamekeeper at Home is also included for the relevance of its subject-matter. All of the works in Part Three stand in contrast to Hardy's novels in one way or another, and throughout the essays attention is drawn to the way in which the reception of these particular books is either relevant in a direct way to a consideration of Hardy, or helps to round out the study of Victorian taste and standards of criticism begun in the section devoted to Hardy himself.

The most difficult, though not least important, task in a work of this kind is to try to show how and to what extent the criticisms levelled at a book had a direct effect upon subsequent works. Clearly Hardy did not write down in a neat little notebook a list of points that he had found particularly telling, together with a list of resolutions had been kept. There is not even any underlining in the scrapbook; the references to critics that occur in the prefaces Hardy wrote when his novels were re-issued are not much concerned with heeded advice. Because of this, any

conclusions about the effects of reviews have to be tentative and speculative, but the attempt is nevertheless worth making because it indicates the extent to which the novels enjoyed and studied by this generation are the product not of Thomas Hardy but of Hardy's critics.

The most celebrated occasion on which criticism had an effect on Hardy does not lie within the scope of this particular study, but is relevant to it. It took place in 1895 when Jude the Obscure was published; Weber records the following observation by Hardy:

'The only effect of it [Jude] on human conduct that I could discover,' he grimly remarked years later, was 'its effect on myself - the experience completely curing me of further interest in novel-writing.' He never wrote another.¹¹

There were doubtless other factors involved in Hardy's decision to abandon prose fiction,¹² but any knowledge of the vicissitudes of critical appreciation with which

11 C. J. Weber, Hardy of Wessex, London, 1966, p. 210.

12 The reviews themselves had another important if indirect effect, for it seems very likely that the awkward position that the book's reception put him in as a man also counted for something with a man who was, surely, very sensitive about his position in society: the Life records (p. 276) "Hardy found that newspaper comments on Jude the Obscure were producing phenomena among his country friends which were extensive and peculiar, they having a pathetic reverence for press opinions."

Hardy's career had begun and through which it progressed will make it clear that in making his decision Hardy may well have had in mind the fact that, now that he was financially secure, he could at last escape from any obligation to listen to the reviewers. It is appropriately ironical that, though he did not know it, the battle was not ending but was simply entering on another phase: he published his first book of poetry in 1898 and there are reviews written of his poetry that are if anything more wrong-headed than the worst of the reviews written about the novels. There can be little doubt that this was infinitely more painful to him. But that is another story.

PART ONE

THE CRITICAL CLIMATE

CHAPTER 1

NOVELS AND REVIEWS OF 1871

In walking along the sea-shore when a gentle breeze is blowing, and in watching the constant succession of waves, one may be reminded of the equally constant succession of novels. Each little wave comes up with such an important air, curls over, makes its roar and its foam, and runs up the beach as if it were doing something that had never been done before and would hardly ever be done so well again. But before it has had time to sink back into obscurity, another wave is ready to follow it with the same little roar, the same little foam, and the same confidence that it also is doing something very wonderful and very new. Each tenth wave perhaps is justified in its conceit, for it runs at least a yard or so above its rival, and so for a moment draws the attention of those who are strolling along the beach. So it is with our novels. Their roar, their foam, or rather, we may say, their froth, is never-ending. Every day sees a fresh one, often two fresh ones, published. Not one of them knows what diffidence is. Each one, on the contrary, comes bursting on the world as if its froth were not the froth of yesterday, and as if it bore in itself something quite fresh, and not the old sands and mud that have been washing up again and again. It is scarcely possible to lose one's temper in watching this literary flood. Each author is so well satisfied with himself and with his little splash, and is so convinced that his readers will be equally well satisfied, that it is difficult to refuse one's sympathy and applause.¹

Any writer about to launch out in 1871 on a career as a novelist might well have found such a view of the current situation daunting; when it was written Hardy's own first published novel must have been in the hands of the binders, and in six weeks it would be ready to make its splash on the shore of novel-reading England.

1 From a review of Dorothy Fox by Louisa Parr; Saturday Review, February 11, 1871, p. 184. The volume numbers in 1871 for the periodicals dealt with in this chapter are as follows: Athenaeum, January-June, 1871 (i), and July-December, 1871 (ii); Saturday Review, January-June, xxxi, and July-December, xxxii; Spectator, January-December, xliv.

The reviewer, in expressing his mood of amiable weariness was if anything underestimating the quantity and overestimating the quality of the fiction of the year. It is true that only 167 new novels were received for review by the weeklies in 1871, but the number published must have been almost twice as many more.² The Saturday Review writer has been able to remain philosophical about the matter but the Queen,³ eighteen months later, using the same metaphor, is much less charitable:

The tide of novel writing should be at its height now, if ever. For the last two years it has been rising higher, and bringing more trash with it; and our best wish for the reading public is that it should ebb rapidly from this moment, and for the future keep within reasonable limits.

The overestimation comes in the Saturday Review's thinking that perhaps one book in ten will make a lasting impression. In a commercial sense this may have been true enough, for several novels of the year ran to more than one edition within twelve months. Nevertheless, although at

2 I have been unable to discover the exact figure for 1871, but it is reported (in Public Opinion, February 22, 1873, p. 239) that the Publishers' Circular's review of books published in 1872 shows that 468 new novels were published in 1872. This number had risen to 516 by 1874 (Public Opinion, January 9, 1875, p. 49) and dropped again to 446 by 1877 (Public Opinion, January 5, 1878, p. 17). It seems reasonable to suppose that the figure for 1871 must lie somewhere between 425 and 500. The Times Literary Supplement for December 31, 1964 gives some recent figures: "Fiction is obviously becoming less popular or at least less profitable. After a small and unusual spurt in 1963 the figures this year again show a decline, with 81 fewer new novels in a total of 2294."

3 March 22, 1873, p. 234.

least a dozen survived into the twentieth century (including some lesser-known works by well-known authors, such as Meredith's The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Lytton's The Coming Race, and Charles Reade's A Terrible Temptation), of all the scores of novels written, published, reviewed, bought, and read in 1871 only three (less than one per cent) are in print in 1967: Middlemarch, Ralph the Heir, and Desperate Remedies.

Throughout 1871, then, at least one new novel was offered to the reading public every day; and for those members of that public who were not inclined, or had not the time, to read them all, the reviewers were there to offer guidance and advice.⁴

4 The usefulness of guidance on one score at least is apparent from three excerpts from the Queen article of March 22, 1873: "For one man who reads a novel, of any class whatever, there are perhaps ten women who make the perusal of this species of literature almost their sole employment. ... The novel is a principal medium through which ladies can gain an insight into the habits, manners, and feelings of the world around and below them [my italics] for the seclusion of English home life does not permit to many in their whole personal experience opportunities of seeing such a variety of character and motive as may be gathered from one good work of fiction. ... Parents and teachers are under an obligation to afford young minds opportunities of making the acquaintance of the best examples of modern literature; and if they are not readers, themselves, it is still not difficult to make a selection. Let them read the notices of new works in the columns of respectable journals, and if they possess common judgment they will have no manner of doubt about the tendency of the book under consideration; for, however critics may differ, and under or over rate the literary value of a novel, their position is in itself a guarantee that they are persons of refinement, and quite competent to estimate the relation of literature to morals. Though the press is prevented by various considerations from giving expression to very strong condemnatory opinions, its office of censorship [my italics] would be at an end if there were not effectual means of indicating the character of a book when necessary."

There is something to be said for regarding the decades between 1850 and 1900 as the hey-day of British book-reviewing. Certainly, as J. D. Jump has pointed out,⁵ the practice in England "virtually began with the nineteenth century. ... The great quarterlies were the first result," the pre-eminence of which was to be challenged by "the shorter and prompter notices appearing in the political and literary weeklies"; and the golden age of the weekly began with the founding of the Saturday Review in 1855. For forty-five years the great trio of weeklies, the Saturday Review together with the Athenaeum and the Spectator (both of which had been founded in 1828) held the centre of the stage; after that, the influence of such journals declined as that of mass-circulation newspapers increased. J. Middleton Murry, writing on the discontents of modern authorship in 1938, suggested that "one of the most practical aspects of change that has come over the profession of author, ... is the almost complete disappearance of professional reviewing ... the reasonable attitude may be to recognize that it attained importance only during a very definite and circumscribed period of English history - roughly, the period when the Victorian enthusiasm for education was on the up-grade, and before the effects of the Elementary

5 J. D. Jump, "Weekly Reviewing in the Eighteen-Fifties" Review of English Studies, XXIV (1948), p. 42.

Education Act of 1870 had really made themselves felt in the vast extension of newspaper circulations. . . . Book reviewing has perished as the organs of opinion have perished."⁶ In 1871, however, reviewers were numerous and indefatigable.

It is difficult to estimate exactly how many periodicals regularly published critical notices of prose fiction, or how many review copies a publisher distributed. William Tinsley, who published Hardy's first three novels, wrote of Under the Greenwood Tree (which appeared in 1872), "I raved about the book and I gave it away wholesale to pressmen . . .",⁷ and in July 1871 he inserted a full-page advertisement in the Saturday Review most of which was taken up with excerpts from 44 reviews of B. L. Farjeon's Joshua Marvel, 25 of which were published in provincial newspapers. If these excerpts are genuine, and if we bear in mind that at least two periodicals reviewed the novel subsequently and that it was ignored by two of those which regularly carried reviews of novels and by another half-dozen which did so occasionally, we may take it that a novel might be noticed in as many as sixty places.

Then as now, however, reviews in provincial newspapers were likely to be of much less interest for the publisher than those in the national newspapers and periodicals, and displays

6 Letter to the Times Literary Supplement, September 17, 1938, p. 597.

7 William Tinsley, Random Recollections of an Old Publisher, 2 vols., 1905, I. p. 126.

like that for Joshua Marvel were very uncommon; it is the London critics who count. Tinsley writes, "At the time that work [East Lynne] was published [1861], a really good review in The Times would help the sale of a novel to a very large extent; ... I have heard it said, and can quite believe it, that The Times review of the 'Life of George Stephenson' was worth a good deal over a thousand pounds to Samuel Smiles, the author of the book."⁸ Similarly Leslie Stephen wrote to Hardy in 1874, concerning the reception of Far from the Madding Crowd, to the effect that "the Spectator, though flighty in its head, has really a good deal of critical feeling - I always liked to be praised by it."⁹

What was true for the Times and the Spectator would certainly hold good for the Saturday Review and the Athenaeum. Stephen, writing in 1895, says of the former, "the 'Saturday Review' marked at the time as distinct an advance above the previous level as the old 'Edinburgh Review',"¹⁰ and Matthew Arnold, in Culture and Anarchy, remarks that "within certain limits ... the Saturday Review, may, on matters of literature and taste, be fairly regarded, relatively to the mass of

8 Tinsley, Vol. I, p. 129.

9 Letter of 8 January, 1874, printed in R. L. Purdy, Thomas Hardy, A Bibliographical Study, 1954, p. 337.

10 Leslie Stephen, Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, 1895, p. 150, quoted by Jump, p. 43.

newspapers which treat these matters, as a kind of organ of reason"¹¹ - a judgment which, though it may appear to be faint praise, is clearly meant in its context to be taken as a compliment of some magnitude. In the only substantial recent study of mid-Victorian journals,¹² the author describes the Saturday Review as "far above all other political-literary Reviews of the time, both in terms of quality of writing, and importance as an organ of opinion". A share of the praise also comes to the Athenaeum which was much more devoted to the arts, literature and science than to the political movements of the day: Tinsley, looking back on his career as a publisher, refers to it as "an acknowledged great literary paper in England",¹³ while the Westminster Review in October 1871 calls it "our leading literary periodical". Ellegard says of it, "... it had something of the position of the Times in its own field: it was regarded as almost indispensable among literary and scientific men. Its coverage of events in the learned world was much fuller than that provided by any other periodical." G. M. Young goes further: "For the general movement

11 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (ed. by J. D. Wilson), Cambridge, 1932, p. 110.

12 Alvar Ellegard, The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain, Göteborgs Universitets Arsskrift, LXIII, Stockholm, 1958, pp. 16 ff.

13 Tinsley, Vol. II, p. 264.

of English thought in the mid-Victorian period, and somewhat later, it is the prime and indispensable document ..."¹⁴

It is clear that these three weeklies together reached and influenced, though doubtless within limits and in a variety of ways, a very substantial proportion of the cultivated and literate section of British society.¹⁵ Their combined circulation of roughly 40,000 compared favourably with that of the Times (63,000), and is substantial even when set against those of the penny dailies, the Daily Telegraph (190,000), Standard (140,000), and Daily News (90,000).¹⁶

- 14 G. M. Young from 'The New Cortegiano' originally published in Daylight and Champagne (1937), reprinted in Victorian Essays, London, 1962, p. 209.
- 15 The Newspaper Press Directory for 1871 has this to say of them: Athenaeum (p. 15), "The criticism ... is never severe for the sake of severity; but at the same time it never permits a semblance of talent or bienveillance to pass for the reality. The reviews [are] ... wholly free from political bias, a very nightmare on the energies of criticism"; Saturday Review (p. 25), "... such is the ability and earnestness of its writers (the list includes some of the most eminent men of the day), that it is found upon the table of almost every one who takes an interest in the politics, literature, art, and science, of the present or past"; Spectator (p. 25), "the literary criticism is perfectly impartial; it never descends into mere eulogy on the one hand, or abuse on the other; but, alike discerning, industrious and painstaking, it elicits every excellence, and exhibits every characteristic feature, of the work under review."
- 16 All circulation figures are Ellegard's estimates except that for the Times which he took from Vol. III of The History of The Times. One may compare the situation in 1871 when circulation of the three weeklies was almost 10% of that of the largest dailies, with that in 1965 when the combined circulations of the Listener, New Statesman, and Spectator (approx. 200,000) is a mere 1.7% of the combined circulation of the Daily Mirror, Daily Express and Daily Mail (approx. 11,500,000).

The Athenaeum carried the greatest number of publishers' advertisements, and there was considerable demand for space, so much so that its publisher "found great difficulty in obliging all his customers".¹⁷ (Ellegard suggests that much of the clear profit of £ 7200 a year which the proprietor is said to have made in the 1870's must have come from advertisements.) The issue for the day on which Desperate Remedies was published, March 25, 1871, may serve as a typical example: it consisted of 32 pages, 15 of which were given over to advertisements, almost all of them for books. 26 different publishers offered more than 250 books, 31 of which were new novels. About a fifth of the books announced were accompanied by excerpts (99 in all) from reviews in 37 different periodicals, (excluding technical and specialist journals). Of the 99 quotations only eight were taken from provincial newspapers, while 33 came from ten London dailies, and 28 from the four leading weekly reviews - the three already mentioned and the Examiner.

This study will ignore almost entirely reviews in provincial newspapers, partly because their influence on the purchasing of books may be taken to have been slight, partly because

17 Tinsley, Vol. II, p. 264.

the evidence of Hardy's scrapbooks of reviews suggests that he himself hardly ever came across them, and partly because they are the most difficult to trace.

* * * * *

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a consideration of the reception accorded by the Athenaeum, Saturday Review, and Spectator, in the first six months of 1871, to twenty-seven novels, with a view to producing a background against which to look at the detailed study of the treatment which Hardy received at the hands of the reviewers.

This preliminary survey is limited to the three major weeklies for three reasons: the Victorians themselves seem to have regarded them as the most reliable arbiters of taste; they published more novel reviews of substantial length than any other periodicals of the day; they are the only three which reviewed all eight of the novels by Hardy included in the period with which this thesis deals.¹⁸ The survey covers only twenty-seven novels because this is the number of new novels published in the six-month period that were noticed in all three papers.

That the weeklies were not the only periodicals to review novels has already been pointed out, but it will be

18 The Examiner and the Academy, the only comparable journals of the time, are not included since both ignored Desperate Remedies, Under the Greenwood Tree and A Pair of Blue Eyes; in addition the Examiner had ceased publication by the time A Laodicean was published in December 1881.

useful to indicate more clearly how much superior were the three chosen for intensive study here. The quarterlies and monthlies tended to ignore novels altogether, though all of them regularly devoted space to reviews of other books; the Quarterly Review did not deal with a single novel in 1871; the Edinburgh Review considered only one (W. S. Trench's Ierne) and this was clearly chosen because of the political issues raised in it; the Dublin Review had an article on Dickens and Thackeray and nothing else; the Contemporary Review had only one article which has anything to do with fiction (an essay on George MacDonald). The Fortnightly Review included in the issue for June 1 a review article dealing with five recent novels, but it ignored all others; and Blackwood's Magazine reviewed a total of eight, three of them in a review article which was little more than an excuse to preach a sermon against the bad taste of writing fictional accounts of actual infamous murder trials. Only two periodicals of this kind had regular notices of prose fiction: the Westminster Review and the British Quarterly Review. The Westminster, however, covered less than a fifth of the novels published and seldom devoted more than a column to any one book, and the British Quarterly reviewed only twelve of the twenty-seven 'representative' novels dealt with in this chapter. Monthly magazines such as Macmillan's and the Cornhill regularly serialized novels but never reviewed them.

Some of the weeklies other than the three major journals were fairly generous with their space: the Graphic had reviews of novels in 23 of the 52 issues for 1871, although a review seldom extended to more than 200 words, and the Examiner had at least one in almost every issue, but the total number of reviews was not as great as those in any of the three main papers, (of the 27 novels to be studied here, the Examiner reviewed 19). Other weeklies which paid considerable attention to novels were John Bull, Vanity Fair and the Guardian, which reviewed 16, 13 and 13, respectively, of the 27. The typical John Bull review was about a column in length (approximately 1200 words) and was both lively and informative; that in Vanity Fair on the other hand was very short, often taking fewer than fifteen lines, was more blunt than elegant, and was often facetious. The Anglo-Catholic Guardian¹⁹ reviewed novels seriously and at length, demanding as a rule a high moral tone: it was one of the few journals which consistently reviewed Hardy's novels.

Most of the rest of the weeklies were by no means so regular in covering the new novels. The Academy²⁰ reviewed

19 It was described in the Newspaper Press Directory for 1871 as containing "well-written criticisms on literature, music and the arts, and able leading articles on most subjects which bear on the social reforms brought before the public" (p. 20).

20 In fact the Academy appeared every fortnight at this time; when it became a weekly in 1874 much more space became available for reviews of novels. It carried at the top of its editorial column the following statement: "Readers are reminded that the mention of New Books, Articles, &c. in our lists is intended as a guarantee of their importance."

only a handful of novels in the whole year, most of them in one article published just before Christmas. Queen, the lady's counterpart to the gentleman's Vanity Fair, had a weekly column "The Library", in which novel reviews appeared from time to time together with regular notices of poetry, works of natural history, sermons and such uplifting and helpful books for the Victorian nation as Gone Before (Being a Manual of Consolation for the Bereaved, and a Well of Sympathy for the Sorrowing, Filled from Many Sources. Third edition, revised).²¹ Reviews in Queen were often moral and didactic in tone and usually graceful in style. Other weeklies such as the Illustrated London News, Pictorial World, and Public Opinion reviewed novels even more sporadically, the amount of space made available in the first two being determined by the amount required for engravings illustrating the events of the day. Others, such as Punch and Chambers' Journal, carried no reviews of any kind.

The daily newspapers were clearly more concerned with news than opinion, and if the events of the day were numerous and exciting then reviews were crowded out. The Times, for instance, did not have then, as it has now, a particular page set aside in one issue every week for book reviewing: books were reviewed only when the space was available - when

21 June 24, 1876.

Parliament was in session they were hardly ever considered, and in the early months of 1871 news of the last stages of the Franco-Prussian war and the hundreds of messages in the Personal Column for residents of Paris, also tended to remove book reviews from the scene. In the first four months of 1871 only eight of the 103 issues had reviews of novels, and it must be added that these are not of much interest to the present-day student since they are essentially mere summaries of the plot.²²

What was true for the Times applied equally to several other dailies. The Daily News had an occasional column called "New Fiction" which hardly ever appeared while Parliament was sitting, but in the nine issues published during the Easter Recess (April 5-16, 1871) it included the feature on four occasions, giving over to reviews a total of eleven whole columns; and in one issue during the Whitsun week-end it reviewed A Daughter of Heth, The Golden Bait, For Lack of Gold, Askeros Kassis, Only a Commoner, Influence, The Carylls,

22 The review of Ralph the Heir for example (on April 17, 1871), though it occupies two full columns and extends to approximately 3200 words, had fewer than 250 words of criticism or comment. It has to be admitted though that the style of what comment there was is such as to provide good quotable excerpts for publishers' announcements.

Eventide and Gerald Hastings.²³ The searcher for reviews at first comes to a Monday issue with some hope of success because there will be no Parliamentary Report, but the hope gradually declines as he finds how often the editor decided to devote the space it usually occupies to a report of a sporting event, a horse show, or some similar Saturday event. The struggle for space in such newspapers as the Daily News and the Daily Telegraph became even keener when important cases were being tried: reporting of the Tichborne Claimant's trial began on May 15, 1871 and took up pages of space in every issue published while it was proceeding. Some morning papers, in particular the Standard and the Scotsman, at this time gave over very little space to books of any kind, hardly any to novels.

Some of the evening papers were attentive to new books, partly, presumably, because they were not obliged to devote so much space to complete reports of the previous day's events, but they tended to be smaller, so that the possible benefits from this different approach to the news were offset by the shortage of space; nevertheless the Pall Mall Gazette regularly carried quite lengthy reviews of novels, including notices in 1871 of nine of the twenty-seven. The Court Circular and

23 The Morning Post, which carried more reviews than most other morning dailies, also 'saved up' its articles about fiction until Parliament was in recess: of the 14 notices it published of books in the selection of 27, all but 5 appeared at Easter or Whitsun.

the Court Journal were much the same as the Pall Mall Gazette in size and format, but since they tended to include much more Social News the room for book reviews was rather more restricted. On the other hand the Globe and the Echo coming half-way between the morning papers and the other evening ones²⁴ published reviews more frequently.²⁵ Their assessments of novels (particularly the reviews in the Echo) were often much more reflective than those in their morning counterparts, perhaps because evening papers were read under different circumstances and by a different clientele.

The modern reader is struck at once by one feature of book-reviewing in the mid-Victorian serious periodicals: the length of the reviews. The amount of space given over to books that were considered to be of first importance is phenomenal by present-day standards. The Times might not have space for many reviews but on April 12, 1871, it gave a whole page (almost 10,000 words) to a consideration of Jowett's translation of the Dialogues of Plato. This particular work received a great deal of attention elsewhere: both the Athenaeum

24. They had four columns per page compared with six or seven for the former and two for the latter, and the dimensions of their pages and the size of their type were also bigger than those of the Pall Mall Gazette.

25. The Echo, for example, had book reviews on April 1, 3, 11, 12, 14, 15 and 17. By 1872, however, they are much less frequent - a maximum of one a week.

and the Spectator reviewed it in two consecutive numbers,²⁶ each devoting more than 5,000 words to it; the Saturday Review²⁷ gave it two full pages (approximately 3,750 words). By way of contrast some current figures might be considered: the longest book reviews in the current issues of the Times,²⁸ Listener,²⁹ New Statesman³⁰ and Observer³¹ are, respectively, approximately 600 words, just over 900, almost 1,750 and about 1,450. The longest review of a novel in the current Times Literary Supplement is 1,030 words.³²

Jowett's work admittedly received special treatment; not only was it regarded as one of the major publications of the year, it also took up four volumes and gave the reviewer, therefore, a great deal to consider; it provides, nevertheless, an indication of how much space could be made available when the occasion demanded it. The difference between this exceptional case and the standard one is, moreover, not all that great. The 10,000 words on Jowett in the Times had been

26 March 4 and 11 (Athenaeum); April 8 and 15 (Spectator).

27 April 15, 1871.

28 Review of I. R. Sinai, The Challenge of Modernisation, March 5, 1964. This chapter was first drafted in 1964.

29 Review of Brian Inglis, Fringe Medicine, March 5, 1964.

30 Review of Philip Larkin, The Whitsun Weddings, February 28, 1964.

31 Review of Brian Inglis, Fringe Medicine, March 1, 1964.

32 Review of Anthony Powell, Valley of Bones, March 5, 1964.

preceded a week earlier by almost 5,000 on Ierne,³³ and a few days later Ralph the Heir received more than 3,000. Similarly Jowett's work merited 3,500 words in the Saturday Review, but the standard length for a review of a novel in its pages was more than 2,000, and non-fiction generally received slightly more attention.

In addition to the length of the reviews, there are three other features of mid-Victorian reviewing which strike the modern reader and which differentiate it from what he is used to: the reviews are nearly all anonymous; they frequently include lengthy quotations from the work under consideration; and, at least in the case of novel-reviewing, there is often a strong didactic streak which is reminiscent of an adjudicator's speech at a musical festival.

The anonymity was not in fact quite universal, for there were several periodicals, including the Academy and the Fortnightly Review, whose contributors were always identified;³⁴ but the other major and well-established papers preserved the convention. It clearly had disadvantages and it came under

33 April 7, 1871.

34 The Examiner appears to have changed its policy in 1875; its review of Far from the Madding Crowd (December 5, 1874) is signed, but that of The Hand of Ethelberta (May 13, 1876), and subsequent Hardy reviews, are not.

fire from time to time but, as Jump observes,³⁵ "At its best, it encouraged the reviewer to subordinate his personal likes and dislikes to judgments dependent upon an impersonal standard of value which he and his colleagues alike respected. It is clear that most reviewers on each of the principal weeklies acknowledged the existence of such a standard and attempted to assess particular publications with reference to it." There can be no question that the editors of the principal weeklies felt strongly on the subject. Two of the greatest of them, Charles Wentworth Dilke of the Athenaeum, and John Douglas Cook of the Saturday Review, both held rigidly to the principle: the historian of the Athenaeum, L. A. Marchand, writes:

It is curious that while other editors used anonymity as a convenient cloak for personal or party animosity, on the one hand, or for puffing friends on the other, Dilke considered it a safe-guard of independent reviewing. Not only were the reviews unsigned so that the author or publisher could not identify the critic and so exert influence on him, but Dilke never signed anything that he himself wrote, and he carefully refrained from putting the names of reviewers of books written by members of the Athenaeum staff in the marked office file. Nor were the sacred secrets of authorship of reviews permitted to go out of the office.³⁶

35 Jump, p. 44.

36 L. A. Marchand, The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture, Chapel Hill, N. C., 1941, n. pp. 105-106.

And Cook is reported as saying,

Once let newspaper articles declare their authorship on their faces, and the London press will become the happy hunting-ground of every jackass that can bray, of every quack who wishes to advertise his name or sling his venom. . . . This Review is an organ of opinion, not a mountebank's platform.³⁷

An interesting reflection on the question of anonymous reviewing and an indication that the suspicion that reviews were used "for puffing friends" still persisted in 1871, is given in a letter to the Athenaeum³⁸ from William Black, the author of A Daughter of Heth, in many respects the best-received novel of the year. It reads:

Will you allow me to call the attention of your readers to a matter which concerns alike authors, editors, and reviewers? I find in the current number of Blackwood's Magazine the following reference to a book of mine:- "It has been received by the newspapers with a furore of admiration, which is equally remarkable in its warmth and in its unanimity, and recalls to one's mind amusingly the remarks of Mr. Bulmer, which we have quoted above, in respect to the advantage of belonging to a Mutual Admiration Society." Now as the writer goes on to say that I am unknown to him except through my book, it follows that the above passage, if it means anything, means that an author whose book is fortunate enough to be received by the critics with warm and unanimous praise must be suspected of being a member of a disgraceful conspiracy to deceive the public. So far as I am concerned, I have a plain answer to the coarse

37 T. H. S. Escot, Platform, Press, Politics, and Play, 1895, p. 213, quoted in M. M. Bevington, The Saturday Review 1855-1868, New York, 1941, p. 40.

38 October 7, 1871, p. 466.

imputation, which is directed, not only against myself, but against such journals as the Saturday Review, Spectator, and Pall Mall Gazette. The first edition of 'A Daughter of Heth' was placed before the press and the public as an anonymous publication. Moreover, of the numerous reviewers who spoke of the book with a generosity and friendliness for which I cannot be sufficiently grateful, only one, so far as I am aware, knew that I was the author of the work; and that one, out of the whole number, is the only one whom I know personally. I leave your readers to draw their own inferences from these facts.

In point of fact the principal weeklies retained their policy of anonymity for many years: the Saturday Review "until 1894, when Mr. Shaw stipulated the appending of 'G.B.S.' as one of the conditions upon which he would write for Frank Harris,"³⁹ the Spectator until the 1920's, and the Athenaeum until just before its demise in 1921. Part of the outcome of Middleton Murry's letter about the discontents of modern authors was an article by Stephen Spender in the Times Literary Supplement⁴⁰ entitled "A Plea for More Anonymity - The Future of Reviewing".

The tendency to quote and to offer instruction to novelists will be discussed as part of the consideration of the twenty-seven novels.

What was the state of the novel in 1871 with Dickens and Thackeray dead and without a successful novel from George Eliot

39 Bewington, op. cit., p. 39.

40 October 8, 1938, p. 612.

for eight years? What was it that the anonymous and loquacious reviewers had to read; and how did they look upon the task of writing about what they read? Hugh Walpole, writing in 1929, notices that

Up to 1870 the English novel was the most English thing in England ... it had been consistently regarded as a happy accident rather than an Art, and ... it had in general grown so virtuous that it kept touch with real life only with great difficulty.⁴¹

He elaborates his second point as follows:

Richardson was the father-confessor of his readers, Fielding the jolly companion, Scott the fireside story-teller, Thackeray the moral teacher, Dickens the exuberant improviser. ... No one, even Hazlitt, wrote about the novel as an Art. It was considered a pleasant minor occupation for self-indulgent persons who had not quite as much work as they ought to have.⁴²

Just how many there were who appear to have fitted this description can be seen in an essay⁴³ written by Walter de la Mare at the same time, in which he points out that nine of the more prolific female novelists of the 'seventies were "responsible for about 554 publications in all, chiefly in three volumes. An average of sixty-one each ..." and three of them, 'Ouida', Mrs. Henry Wood and Miss Braddon, between them wrote thirty-five novels in this one decade. A reviewer of a new novel by Florence Marryat

41 Hugh Walpole, "Novelists of the 'Seventies" in The Eighteen-Seventies, Cambridge, 1929, p. 24.

42 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

43 Walter de la Mare, "Women Novelists of the 'Seventies" in The Eighteen-Seventies, p. 55.

reminded her⁴⁴ reprovingly that she had written as many novels in ten years as her distinguished father had done in a life-time.

It is small wonder that the reviewer lucky enough to be given the first part of Middlemarch to notice in the Athenaeum began,

A new novel by George Eliot comes to sojourners in the Madash Barnea of fiction like an August thunderstorm after weeks of baked air and brazen sky. We look forward to it; we look back at it. We are the happier for it, and are full of a certain quiet peace and gratitude.⁴⁵

for it came as an antidote to reviewing in such a manner as this at the other extreme:

It is one of those books which we meet fortunately only at intervals, the intense silliness and vulgarity of which make us as we read grow hot with the feeling of having ourselves committed some action in grossly bad taste.⁴⁶

In these circumstances it is not uncommon to find the reviewer facetiously regarding himself as one in the role of "taster" for the public. Mrs. Locke's Eventide was dismissed by the Athenaeum in this way: "If the experience earned by wading through the volumes of 'Eventide' should possibly deter others from the same dreary task the reviewer's labour will

44 Review of Her Lord and Master in the Spectator, April 8, 1871, p. 422.

45 December 2, 1871, p. 713.

46 Review of Grantley Vivian (anon.) in the Athenaeum, June 24, 1871, p. 781.

not have been spent in vain."⁴⁷ Another reviewer may be a little less harsh and a little more humorous by simply passing on advice:

Our own rule in reading such a story as the one we are reviewing - and we give it for the benefit of our readers - is to skip over all pages where there are no proper names. It at once saves a great deal of idle reading, and renders the plot far more easily followed.⁴⁸

The business of reviewing, even though (if Walpole was right) there were no principles whereby to judge the novel as an art, was nevertheless not simply haphazard and crude. The critics were clearly capable of formulating some criteria, some rules of thumb, by which to assess novels, and they were not slow to praise lavishly those which met them, or to condemn savagely those which did not. It is not always possible, however, for the present-day reader to be sure that the novel-reviewer took his job seriously and regarded it as of real importance, and it may well be that it was a similar uncertainty which led George Lewes to write, in 1865, one of the most important critiques on the subject published at that time.⁴⁹

The central thesis of the article is summed up in one sentence: "Critics have ceased to regard novels as

47 February 11, 1871, p. 173.

48 Review of R. E. Francillon, Earl's Dene in the Saturday Review, March 11, 1871, p. 316.

49 "Criticism in Relation to Novels", Fortnightly Review, iii (1865-6), 352-61.

Literature, and do not think of applying to the style and sentiments of a fiction those ordinary canons which would be applied to a history, an article or a pamphlet."⁵⁰ The state of affairs which provoked such a judgment and the benefits that would come if there were a change, are described at some length.

Lewes argues first that there had been a tendency to undervalue the novel:

... the general estimation of prose fiction as a branch of Literature has something contemptuous in it. This is shown not only in the condescending tone in which critics speak, and the carelessness with which they praise, but also ... in the rashness with which writers, confessedly incapable of success in far inferior efforts, will confidently attempt fiction as if it were the easiest of literary tasks.

... contempt is general, because the combination of powers necessary for the production of three volumes of Circulating Library reminiscences is very common. ... The intellectual feebleness of readers in general prevents their forming a discriminating estimate of the worth of such works; and most of those who are capable of discrimination have had their standard of expectation so lowered by the profusion of mediocrity, that they languidly acquiesce in the implied assumption that novels are removed from the canons of commonsense criticism. Hence the activity of this commerce of trash.⁵¹

After elaborating on the readiness with which incompetent

50 Lewes, p. 354.

51 Ibid., p. 352.

people will "try their hand at a novel",⁵² Lewes suggests that the critics are greatly to blame for the lamentable situation:

... too many of us help to debase [the standard of public taste] by taking a standard from the Circulating Library, and by a half-contemptuous, half-languid patronage of what we do not seriously admire. The lavish eulogies which welcome very trivial works as if they are masterpieces, are sometimes the genuine expression of very ignorant writers (for easy as it is to write a poor novel, to review it is easier still ...); but sometimes they are judgments formed solely in reference to the degraded standard which the multitude of poor works has introduced. Thus although the same terms of commendation are applied to the last new novel which are applied to "Vanity Fair" or "Pride and Prejudice", the standard is nevertheless insensibly changed, and the critic who uses the same language respecting both never really thinks of placing both in the same class. The general public knows nothing of this change of standard.⁵³

52 Some idea of the state of affairs with which Lewes contended may be seen from the following item which appeared in the Westminster Review for October 1871 (p. 554): "In our last number we called attention to the fact that publishers are now ordering their novels from authors much as a large draper might order calicoes of a certain pattern, width, and length from a manufacturer. The sensation pattered appeared at the same time as the following advertisement in The Athenaeum: - 'wanted, a stirring, lively story (original), of Forty or Fifty Chapters for a popular Weekly Periodical. It is essential that it should be full of incident, abound in dramatic description, and contain a variety of modern life and character. Also it should be moral in its tone and instructive in its teaching. For a suitable production of an experienced writer, a good price will be given ...'

"Now as this advertisement appeared in our leading literary periodical, it necessarily appealed to educated men and women. How many pens it has already set in movement we shall not venture to conjecture. Nor shall we moralize about the amount of mischief such an advertisement does to all real art."

53 Ibid., p. 353.

... the vast increase of novels, mostly worthless, is a serious danger to public culture, a danger which tends to become more and more imminent, and can only be arrested by an energetic resolution on the part of the critics to do their duty with conscientious rigour. At present this duty is evaded, or performed fitfully. There is plenty of sarcasm and ill-nature; too much of it; there is little serious criticism which weighs considerately its praise and its blame.⁵⁴

Lewes goes on to suggest that even the best journals "recommend to readers [work that] they would refuse to print"; he explores at length the difficulty which arises from the importance of "plot-interest" and the way in which concentrating attention on this aspect alone can confuse a reviewer's judgment; and he then proceeds to suggest what might result from a new approach to criticism:

... a little critical rigour exercised with respect to the descriptions, dialogues, and reflections which accompany a story, would act beneficially in two ways: first, in affording a test whereby the writer's pretensions might be estimated; secondly, by making writers more vigilant against avoidable mistakes.⁵⁵

As a test ... if we find a man liable to mistake sound for sense, to misapprehend the familiar relations of daily life, to describe vaguely or inaccurately the objects of common experience, or to write insincerely in the belief that he is writing eloquently, then we may a fortiori conclude that he will be still more liable to misapprehend psychological subtleties, to put language into people's mouths which is not the language of real feeling, and to modify the course of events according to some conventional prejudice. In a word, if he is feeble and inaccurate in ordinary matters, he may be

54 Ibid., p. 354.

55 Ibid., p. 356

believed to be feeble and inaccurate in higher matters. If he writes nonsense, or extravagant sentimentality, in uttering his own comments, we may suspect his sense and truthfulness when his personages speak and act.⁵⁶

Lewes criticizes in some detail a novel by Mrs. Trafford, which comes in for some strictures on the grounds of insincerity, "one of the commonest vices of literature", and then goes on to an analysis of the second result he expects from a more stringent approach to the reviewer's task; in the last paragraph of the article (which extends to some 5,000 words in all) he writes:

... the second benefit ... would soon greatly purge novels of their insincerities and nonsense. If critics were vigilant and rigorous, they would somewhat check the presumptuous facility and facundia of indolent novelists, by impressing on them a sense of danger in allowing the pen to wander at random. It would warn them that rhetoric without ideas would lead them into ridicule. It would teach them that what they wrote would not only be read, but reflected on; and if their glittering diction proved on inspection to be tinsel, they would suffer from the exposure. This would lead to a more serious conception of the art, and a more earnest effort to make their works in all respects conformable to sense and artistic truth. The man who begins to be vigilant as to the meaning of his phrases is already half-way towards becoming a good writer. The man who before passing on to his next sentence has already assured himself that the one just written expresses the thought actually in his mind, as well as he can express it, and declines to believe that insincere expressions or careless approximative phrases are good enough for a novel, will soon learn to apply the same vigilance to his conception of character and incident, and will strive to attain clearness of vision and sincerity of expression.

56 Ibid., p. 356.

Let criticism only exact from novels the same respect for truth and common sense which it exacts from other literary works; let it stringently mark where the approbation of a novel is given to it as Literature, and where it is given to plot-interest of a more or less attractive nature, and some good may be effected both on writers and readers.⁵⁷

Lewes clearly thought the danger a serious one, and the article is important for what it says. It may, nevertheless, be asked whether it was important in its effect; a survey such as is attempted next may show the extent to which the advice it contained was heeded. It is certainly worthy of note here that there are two things that Lewes apparently took for granted: firstly, that novelists read the reviewers and may have been inclined to pay attention to their criticisms; and secondly, that novel-readers read the reviewers and made their choice of what to buy or borrow on the basis of the recommendations.

* * * * *

The Athenaeum gives by far the most comprehensive guide to novels of the period; in the first six months of 1871 it received seventy-four novels for review and found room for all of them. In the same period the Spectator noticed forty-eight and the Saturday Review only thirty-two; but since one of these often reviewed a novel which the other ignored, only twenty-seven of the Athenaeum's seventy-four were dealt with.

57 Ibid., p. 361.

by all three papers. It should be pointed out that the conclusions reached and the judgments advanced in this section concerning novel reviewing in 1871 apply with complete accuracy only to the eighty-one reviews of these twenty-seven works, but it is apparent that a study of all the one hundred and fifty-four reviews published in the three periodicals during those six months would not reveal a significantly different picture.⁵⁸

Although the Athenaeum covered far more publications, it did not devote more space to them than the other two; rough calculations⁵⁹ show that, on the contrary, the Athenaeum in those months printed some 45,000 words of novel reviews, the Saturday Review 70,000, and the Spectator 80,000. This arises from the Athenaeum's practice of reviewing almost all fiction in a section (usually the last in the part given over to reviewing) called "Novels of the Week"; indeed, only 7 novels in the whole year's crop of 167 received separate notice in its pages. The average length of the reviews in "Novels of the Week" is about 575⁶⁰ words, the only really lengthy ones among the 27 being The Coming Race (1,550 words) and Ralph the Heir (1,575), both of which receive separate reviews,

58 I have read most of those which are not specifically considered here, as well as all of those which are.

59 To the nearest 5,000 words.

60 All figures here are approximate to the nearest 25; all are given with a slightly greater degree of accuracy in Appendix I.

Ierne (1,625) and Gerald Hastings (1,125) - the latter extending to unusual length because of the reviewer's anxiety to put the novelist right on points of law. The Spectator has two methods of dealing with novels: most receive individual reviews and these extend to about 2,100 words on an average; but about one in five is consigned to the last section of the paper, "Current Literature", where the average length is only 350 words. All reviews in the Saturday Review are individual ones (except on one occasion when two short novels are reviewed together) and all are lengthy, about 2,150 words. Yet another interesting difference from current practice is that books which are condemned are almost invariably given at least as much attention as those which are highly recommended.

The Saturday Review is the most prone to incorporate long excerpts from the work under consideration into the review itself - it does so in 15 of the 27 cases - but the Spectator does so almost as often (14) and at much greater length, for whereas the average amount of quotation is about 250 words in the former, the average is three times that figure in the Spectator; the Athenaeum reviewers on the other hand, with much less space at their disposal, practically never quote more than a phrase or sentence. In those reviews where quotations appear they take up 11% of the space in the case of

the Saturday Review, and more than 30% in the Spectator; the latter, in fact, on three occasions includes more than a thousand words of quotation, and once (when Desperate Remedies is reviewed) quotations amount to as much as 2,050 words, forming about two-thirds of the whole review. In the vast majority of cases a quotation is introduced in order to enable the reviewer to make a complimentary observation; when the writing is bad it is usually described as such and not paraded before the eyes of the reader.

Not only was the Athenaeum the most comprehensive in its coverage but it was also by far the quickest off the mark: all but three of the twenty-seven novels were reviewed within four weeks of their being published (ten of them a week after they appeared) and in no case was there a delay of more than nine weeks; the Saturday Review was rather more desultory, and the Spectator much more so. The average delay before a novel was noticed in the Saturday Review was five weeks; twelve novels were reviewed within four weeks of appearing but only one, The Coming Race, in its first week; the longest delay, suffered by Desperate Remedies, is twenty-seven weeks. (and this may well have been a special case) but there are four other instances of waiting periods of ten weeks or more. The Spectator waited an average of nine weeks; although eleven novels were reviewed within a month of appearing and Ralph the Heir was dealt with immediately, a third of the

novels had to wait at least three months for a review and two of these, Dorothy Fox and Terne, were not reviewed until more than six months after they first appeared.

The twenty-seven novels probably form a representative cross-section of the fiction of the period. The "three-decker", although under attack and expensive (half-a-guinea a volume in most cases⁶¹), still held its own, and more than half of these novels were published in three volumes. Nine of the twenty-seven were published anonymously although the identity of six of the authors has been subsequently revealed or discovered, and of the twenty-four identifiable authors a quarter are women; there is good reason to suppose that at least two of the three who have not been identified were women also. The novels appeared under the imprint of eleven different publishers, seven of them coming from Tinsely Brothers who, with Chapman and Hall, are the only ones to publish more than one or two from among this group.

A subjective appraisal of (in most instances) synopses of the plots of these novels as given in the reviews suggests that eleven of them are romances and another eight have romantic elements; four may be classified as social comment (two

61 The Saturday Review of November 11, 1871 contains an article entitled "A Novel - A Guinea-and-a-half" in which the author makes the following observation: "we consider it something worse than an insult to our intelligence to have shopboys' English and Kitchenmaids' sentiments charged to us at the same rate as a work by the author of Adam Bede."

more are in part); three are clearly Sensation Novels and three others, including Desperate Remedies, were regarded as being on the verge of the sensational; there are two historical romances, both set in Ireland, one straightforward adventure story, and another which mixes various features of travel, adventure and romance, in more or less equal parts. All but two of the novels are in the British Museum. One of the interesting indications of the status of novelist in the last decades of the nineteenth century is to be found in the fact that of the twenty-seven authors no fewer than seventeen are included in the Dictionary of National Biography, the first volume of which appeared in 1885.

A consideration of two novels, one well received, the other not, may serve to open the discussion of the critical attitudes of the reviewers and give an introduction which can be expanded by rather less detailed study of the others, for there is a considerable amount of repetition.

Although the Athenæum (and Blackwood's) did not share the general enthusiasm, A Daughter of Heth was regarded as an unusually good novel, and the critical acclaim clearly did the book much good for it had reached an eleventh (revised) edition within a year.⁶² Why did the reviewers take to it so readily?

62 British Museum Catalogue, works of William Black, novelist.

As far as the Saturday Review⁶³ was concerned it was because it had "humour, sweetness, and pathos", it was a story "told with simplicity and vigour"; it had the rare quality of being "good all through";⁶⁴ the "change of tone and growth of mind" of the hero are "indicated rather than described" and all of this is done "truthfully and delicately"; the "character-painting is subtle and most natural" and as a result a character "lives - he is no abstraction". The quality of the author's "workmanship" is praised, especially because he knows the value of restraint (a characteristic which is rarely found) - the description of a secret love affair is singled out for particular praise:

The fiery passion on which it was based, its secrecy, and therefore its sin, are wonderfully well sketched; partly because, though so fiery, though so passionate, there is nothing in it to offend the taste. It is a sketch, an indication, rather than an elaborate description; and hence it is far more powerful than if it had been more detailed. We recommend this to some of our lady writers who have mistaken sensual detail for strength of passion, and who revolt by minute description.⁶⁵

63 June 24, 1871, p. 812.

64 " ... in general the modern novel which opens well keeps up its verve and liveliness for only the first volume at most; the second is shaky and pointless; and the third loses its interest in a morass of weakness and maundering whence there is no return."

65 The Guardian in its review (July 12, 1871, p. 850) offers a very different opinion: "Surely this is no book to spread among our girls. Sin in intention just stopping short of the act, and therefore excused and tenderly treated, is as dangerous a picture as they can well meet."

The feature which played perhaps the biggest part in making A Daughter of Heth so successful was the heroine, Coquette. Strong characters well presented are of supreme importance: their presence provides the firmest foundation on which to build a good novel; their absence is an almost insurmountable obstacle. Blackwood's review of this novel reminded the author that this is the case, for in the view of the critic he had failed to observe a major principle: "the art of fiction requires that the human figures in the scene should always be first and greatest".⁶⁶ Where Blackwood's saw a defect and believed that Black stressed the wrong aspects of his art, most critics saw his conception of the heroine, while being "by no means original",⁶⁷ as the "special genius of the book":⁶⁸ and "nothing can be better than the contrast between her nature and upbringing and the new circumstances in which she finds herself". The Saturday Review notice goes on to suggest that Black's presentation of a girl of this kind surpasses Dickens himself:

... we cannot recall at this moment one character where the sacrifice is so entirely without self-consciousness ... What spoiled Mr. Dicken's

66 October, 1871, p. 480.

67 Spectator.

68 Saturday Review.

virtuous heroines was the fearful amount of moral posturing they went through, and the distinct self-consciousness which ruined the value of their best deeds. Coquette, however, is free from this blemish.

The Spectator⁶⁹ presents a similar picture: the novel is full of a "melancholy beauty", everything is "so delicately done and with such a sensitive truthfulness"; the hero is "spirited, amusing, and admirably true"; and in addition among the book's charms are "its description of the scenery of the West of Scotland" which is not only "delightful" but reveals the author as "equally an artist and a poet". It is again the strength of the heroine's character, however, "so far from insipidity", that attracts the reviewer, so much so that he is prepared to tolerate certain characteristics which would ordinarily justify an outright condemnation, for he sees Coquette as

without any conscious principle, without a religion,^[70] scarcely even moral in a conventional sense, yet exquisitely good, with a purity and self-forgetfulness that are angelic ... [she is actuated] by deep, unselfish love; in fact, a religion of the heart, pure and simple. This is the clue to her carelessness of principle and apparent immorality. And guided by this, we are not shocked at the leniency of her judgments, the readiness of her compliance ... or even at her views of marriage.

69 June 17, 1871, p. 740.

70 In fact the girl is brought up a Roman Catholic and there are several indications in the book of her devotion to this religion; it is presumably her willingness to attend Protestant services to please her uncle, a clergyman, which leads the reviewer to assume that she has no strong attachment to any.

This is indeed a tribute to Black's subtlety and skill, for moral judgments are almost as numerous as aesthetic ones. A Daughter of Heth is not, however, a perfect book, even for its contemporary readers: the Spectator finds some faults - "without much variety, a little slow, repeating itself overmuch, and perhaps not always quite natural in its incident" - and one serious drawback:

why must the author tax us so heavily for the pleasure he confers. Could he not have been generous, and left us Coquette? ... It would have been so easy to alter ... [but] there is a grey cloud of melancholy over the whole, from the very opening chapter, and one watches and waits in vain for the sunshine which shall warm and brighten the sad life into the rich beauty of full development, but which, after breaking over it only in cold gleams and fitful flashes, leaves the short day to grow darker and darker to its close ...

This flaw was not what concerned the Athenaeum:⁷¹ it concedes that there is "plenty of pathos, humour, and powerful descriptions", but detects a "want of completeness and substance"; in particular it regrets a serious imbalance:

We are no advocates for the mixture of things sacred and profane, in fiction. But if an author goes out of his way to present the humorous side of formal Christianity, which is very ably done in the humble Puritanic figures which the present writer has adopted from Scotch novelists of greater fame, it is almost necessary in common fairness, to present in their essential strength, as well as their accidental absurdity, some of the great principles which have made Puritanism so tenacious in men's consciences.

⁷¹ June 10, 1871, p. 717.

The general impression is one of considerable satisfaction, and in the circumstances the Saturday Review thinks it appropriate to give the author some advice:

We hope we shall see more work as good as this from the same hand; but we must earnestly warn our author against the suicidal haste of the present race of writers, and entreat him to take time, and work well over his next book, remembering that more reputations have been ruined by over-rapid and ill-considered work than fortunes have been made by striking while the iron is hot.

The reception accorded to A Daughter of Heth has been treated at length partly because it introduces a large number of complimentary critical judgments that are common (although they are not often all applied as they are here, to one work). It also helps, however, to distinguish the characteristic flavours of the reviews in the three papers, for though it is unwise either to over-generalize, or to over-emphasize what seem to be distinctive features, yet the criticism by each of them is somehow typical - the Athenaeum, fair but stuffy and unimaginative; the Saturday Review more incisive, more concerned with strengths (or faults) in technique, uncompromising but at the same time rather earnest; the Spectator, generous, more tolerant both morally and aesthetically (though based upon a sound moral foundation), sentimental and good-humoured.

Some of the same characteristics are to be found in their criticisms of a book which was given a far less auspicious

welcome, Sheridan le Fanu's Checkmate. The reviews of this book will augment the number of those qualities both reprehensible and praiseworthy which reviewers appear to have looked for. Whereas A Daughter of Heth is a romance, delicate and melancholy, Checkmate is a Sensation Novel, violent and thrilling, "of the class, that is to say, in which character is subordinated to incident and motive to action".⁷² The Saturday Review⁷³ comes down heavily:

we are criticizing an author who has contrived to write three full volumes without writing a single line that can either instruct or (we should think) amuse any human being. It is indeed a marvel that he should not accidentally have stumbled into something good ... Chance, however, is as little indulgent towards Mr. Le Fanu as nature ... We should be curious to learn whether he has always been able to write such dreary novels as the one before us, or whether his skill has been acquired solely by laborious practice ... the three volumes afford us [nothing], in its fidelity to nature, so worthy of critical comment as a pot-house brawl narrated by one whose clothes had suffered in it.

There is no originality or individuality; to "relieve or heighten his horrors (we know not which)" the author introduces "love episodes which are dull enough, and comic passages which are duller still", and the only compliment is a facetious one to the effect that the author has "studied the taste of his readers, who would seem to be, from the fare he provides them,

72 Athenaeum review of H. Holl, The Golden Bait, February 11, 1871, p. 173.

73 March 18, 1871, p. 351.

about on a level with those who subscribe to the Illustrated Police Gazette". The whole enterprise is "foolish and disagreeable".

The Spectator⁷⁴ on the other hand, though not prepared (to use Lewes' words) "to praise what it would not print", is not prepared either to apply "those ordinary canons which would be applied to a history, an article or a pamphlet":

We confess to a literary weakness for Mr. Le Fanu ... he has a flavour of genius which never entirely leaves him [and] ... Checkmate shows, we are happy to say, a relapse into talent - not talent of a very high kind, ... but still talent - a certain amount of real ingenuity in inventing lurid mysteries, and a certain amount of dash in delineation. If you want a good trashy novel, - not trashy enough to inspire a vexed contempt, - not good enough to challenge criticism or any attempt to compare it with real life, but just trashy enough to make you feel you are amusing yourself and need not even think of such a thing as passing a serious judgment on the book, ... Checkmate is the very book for your purpose. In fact Checkmate is the very model of a story to waste time over without weariness, if that process be ever allowable, ... For such a purpose we should greatly prefer it to Aurora Floyd and the Braddon school of fiction. There is more real power of invention in Mr. Le Fanu, and there is a certain ease of manner and polish of style about his villains ... the vivacity of the book is throughout considerable.

The reviewer reminds his reader not to expect any "sort of attempt to give a picture of [a] ... person's interior mind", speculates that the "moral effect of this thrilling story on some of its circulating-library readers" will not be

74 February 25, 1871, p. 224.

disastrous since the villain has to suffer the amputation of his nose, and leaves the matter there.

The Athenaeum⁷⁵ finds something to say on both sides

We presume that the author will be gratified to learn that in our humble opinion he has discharged his self-imposed and loathsome task with considerable ability and skill. ... whether his conscience and his self-respect will enable him to look back with complacency on the highly-seasoned garbage he has submitted to an omniverous public, is perhaps another question.

Starting from the appraisals of these two widely different works a picture begins to emerge. A novel should instruct and, perhaps, amuse; there should be nothing in it to offend against good taste or accepted moral standards; strong attractive characters presented with care take precedence among desirable ingredients but descriptions of landscape and natural phenomena are welcomed; vigour, directness and simplicity are commendable characteristics of style although these should be tempered with subtlety and delicacy; the novelist should strive to present all sides of any important question he may raise; the reader should not be distressed or horrified or over-stimulated; originality is a virtue, eccentricity is not; a novel is more worthy of serious consideration if it deals with the "interior mind" of its characters, preferably by indication rather than elaborate description; everything should be as true to life as possible.

A study of the reviews of the other twenty-five novels will provide confirmation of all of these points, and add some others, but the most widespread corroboration will be for the last point above; almost every novel is judged at least in part by the extent to which it is or is not "true". The judgment may be expressed in many ways: "an unreal tale of impossible life",⁷⁶ "the book is thoroughly true to nature, and will commend itself to a high class of readers",⁷⁷ "the dialogue throughout is natural and eminently readable",⁷⁸ "truthfulness about the descriptions of things and persons which conciliates the confidence of the reader",⁷⁹ "so antagonistic to the rules and incidents of real life that the story is rendered even less interesting than it otherwise would have been",⁸⁰ but however it may be expressed this critical standard is usually there, although it may be suspended when the reviewer deals with a work like The Lone Ranche which is set in a remote world to which the rules can hardly be expected to apply. The Saturday Review critic of Askaris Kassos makes a helpful distinction along these lines:

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- 76 Review of Askaris Kassos in the Saturday Review, February 18, 1871, p. 221.
- 77 Review of Blanche Seymour in the Graphic, May 6, 1871, p. 418.
- 78 Review of Blanche Seymour in the Spectator, April 1, 1871, p. 388.
- 79 Review of Episodes in an Obscure Life in the Saturday Review, April 8, 1871, p. 446.
- 80 Review of Gerald Hastings in the Athenaeum, January 28, 1871, p. 110.

... the incidents are well told, and would be exciting were it not for the manifest absurdities that beset us at every turn. Mr. de Leon's mistake seems to lie in an attempt to compromise between the superb extravagance of the old oriental fictions and the air of possibility demanded by the more practical modern mind. He does not produce genii at the rubbing of a mug ... But he makes so many other things happen in audacious defiance of the laws of common-place life and character that his story seems even more unreal than "Aladdin" or "Sindbad". Mr. de Leon professes to write of a world we know, and therefore we criticize him. The author of the Arabian Nights transports us beyond all our experience, and in our fortunate moments we may yield ourselves to the illusion and believe him blindly.⁸¹

Another way of passing the same judgment is to be found in the kind of statement which was afterwards often used in criticism of Hardy: the author of Dorothy Fox is said to be⁸² "much more natural when she is in the midst of the simple Quaker life than when she is in the midst of fashionable society. We rather suspect that in painting the former she has only^[83] to draw on her memory, while in painting the latter she has to draw on her imagination"; and, from a review of

81 Review of Askaris Kassos in the Saturday Review, February 18, 1871, p. 221.

82 Saturday Review, February 11, 1871, p. 184.

83 The use of the word 'only' seems to be an unfair devaluation of the novelist's art. A review in Blackwood's in July 1871 (p. 76) is likely to be closer to the truth: "'you have only to put down what you hear and what you see', says the uninstructed critic; and most people believe that it is so, without any knowledge of the real difficulty which a writer has to contend with, whose business it is to elucidate the kernel of truth out of the thousand husky folds of vulgar and tedious fact in which it is wrapped up".

The Canon's Daughter,⁸⁴ "There is a touch of coarseness here and there which seems to appertain to the author rather than to his creations, and which it is not easy to pass by as merely a mistake. It reads as if Mr. Corbet did not, after all, know much of the cultivated class about which he writes on the whole so well ..."

The fondness for truth and the fondness for good strong characters are very closely allied; the ability which Trollope had to satisfy both of them won him such high praise as this beginning to the Spectator review of Ralph the Heir:⁸⁵

Perhaps there is scarcely any intellectual luxury to which the British public is now accustomed, that it would miss so much, as the serials produced by Mr. Trollope's unwearied and unweariable genius. How much knowledge of life, appreciation of its humour, experience of its paradoxes, and mastery of its lessons, is gained at second-hand through Mr. Trollope ... it would not be easy to conjecture. ... Which of us can say that we know even our own circle of friends, political and social, half as well as we have learned ... to know Sir Thomas Underwood and his daughters ... [etc.] ... or that we know the heart of any person at all resembling the breeches-maker ... nearly as completely as we know that of Mr. Neefit, with the pertinacious and half-pathetic workings of whose vulgar and tough little ambition we have been becoming more and more intimate every month for the last year?

It is not only the ability to create a good character that excites admiration but the additional abilities to investigate

84 Spectator, February 25, 1871, p. 226.

85 April 15, 1871, p. 450. The reviewer has clearly been reading the serial parts as they appeared. Reviews of serialized novels were not substantially different from those of novels appearing for the first time, except that the reviewers often seem to be more familiar with the characters and the details of the plot, and seem as a result to write with greater confidence.

a character, to express his personality by subtler means than straightforward description, and to demonstrate familiarity with a variety of people. All of these are desirable too. The anonymous author of Vera accordingly wins from the Spectator⁸⁶ review a mixed reception:

he shows a poet's power in recording the sorrow and loneliness and struggle and resignation of a mind superior to those around it, and compelled to live always in an uncongenial atmosphere. But power to conceive and describe the workings of antagonistic qualities in the same mind - of the good and bad passions - as they reveal themselves in speech, is entirely wanting, and still more the ability to create the wide diversity of character that constitutes society.

The comparison here between the novelist and the poet, the criticism of one art in terms of another, has occurred before, in the Spectator's review of A Daughter of Heth, and it is by no means uncommon; to criticize the novel in the vocabulary of criticism of painting is, however, an even commoner practice, so much so that a modern reader may be led to wonder whether a reviewer at this time regarded it as the highest compliment to tell a novelist that he would have made a good painter. Examples occur everywhere and are sometimes quite elaborate: the author "has the gifts of a painter of domestic life",⁸⁷ or "a happy knack for portraiture";⁸⁸ another "has painted in

86 March 25, 1871, p. 352.

87 Review of Dorothy Fox in the Spectator, July 1, 1871, p. 807.

88 Review of In that State of Life in the Saturday Review, April 22, 1871, p. 508.

such exaggerated and glaring colours that no one will fancy that he is looking at a study from nature",⁸⁹ while the reader is told that in another novel "the subsidiary characters ... fill up the canvas very agreeably".⁹⁰ Sketches, portraits, and compositions abound; characters are drawn and landscapes are painted; the simplest elements of the phraseology of the art critic occur again and again and lend a degree of unfamiliarity to these reviews, reminding a present-day reader of the truth of Walpole's view of the state of the novelist's art in 1870.

Something else that is more common in reviewing then than it is now is a tendency to put novelists right on matters of fact; a variety of subjects is involved, and reviewers seize the chance not only to correct mistakes in foreign languages, but to pass on information about law, medicine, geography, and other topics. Usually the tone in which an author's mistake is corrected is kindly, but occasionally it is patronizing as when, for example, the reviewer of Askaris Kassos in the Saturday Review⁹¹ writes:

That [the author] is conversant with [Egypt] we cannot doubt, although surely here and there his memory played

89 Review of Tom Pippin's Wedding in the Spectator, June 3, 1871, p. 675.

90 Review of Influence in the Spectator, May 20, 1871, p. 616.

91 February 18, 1871, p. 221.

him false, as, for instance, when he makes his hero find his way by the Shoubra Road from the Nile to the tomb of the Mamtook Kings without entering the city of Cairo.

Allied with this trait is that of giving advice to the budding novelist. Most often it takes the form quoted above from the Saturday Review's notice of A Daughter of Heth: do not produce novels too quickly; take pains; be careful. The frequency with which this suggestion is made suggests, perhaps, that the reviewers were genuinely anxious to see an improvement in the art and craft of fiction, especially since it is advice usually reserved for those authors who show promise.⁹² Nowhere is it more feelingly expressed than in the Spectator's review of Florence Marryat's Her Lord and Master,⁹³ written "more in sorrow than in anger, but still not entirely without the latter feeling":

Making every possible allowance for the glittering temptations which beset a writer with a name well known at Mudie's, and the advisability, up to a certain extent, of making hay while the sun shines, we cannot help seriously blaming Mrs. Ross-Church for thus trifling with the public, as well as regretting the damage that must ensue to her literary

92 It recurs frequently in early reviews of Hardy who ignored it, producing a novel a year in the early stages of his career. Black disregarded it even more flagrantly; A Daughter of Heth was, in fact, his second novel of 1871. In a career of fewer than forty years he produced more than thirty novels.

93 April 8, 1871, p. 422.

reputation ... Some people write stupid and wearisome stories because "it is their nature to", but no such excuse can be found for Mrs. Ross-Church.

Other bits of advice are concerned with such virtues as concentrating on those things the author does best or, conversely, ignoring in future elements which are either beyond the author's powers or, like violence and immorality, detrimental to the chances of achieving complete success.

Another favourite idea is pruning: "he must safeguard himself against a fluency of words with which he is gifted. His story might be cut down to one-half its present size, and yet nothing that would be missed would have been excluded."⁹⁴ When, as sometimes happened, the reviewer thinks he sees evidence of advice having been heeded he is not slow to commend the improving writer who can see her own "short-comings so quickly, [and] correct them so adroitly":

[Her Own Fault] may serve as a warning to critics that they should never despair of what are seemingly hopeless cases; that ignorance may educate itself; that there is a certain tact of avoidance that comes of experience and failure; and that in apparent weakness may be the germs of latent strength ... [The author] shows not only great good sense, but very unusual capacity, to renounce the affectation of knowing all about matters of which [she] really knows little or nothing ... pending the development of a comprehensive course of self-cultivation ...⁹⁵

94 . Review of Earl's Dene in the Saturday Review March 11, 1871, p. 316.

95 . Saturday Review, April 29, 1871, p. 542.

One thing on which the critics all agree is that the moral tone of a work should be high, or, at least, that it should not be low; a novel may have little else to commend it, but if it has this then a recommendation is usually forthcoming

On the whole Influence, if slight, is pleasant, and perfectly pure and wholesome. The Decalogue is respected all through, and the book deals neither with crime nor blasphemy; it is not spiced with immorality, nor does it tamper with even the appearance of evil; but it treats of men and women as they are found in quiet, well-conditioned English homes, and so far we are thankful to Mrs. Brookfield for keeping her own feet, and ours in following her, free from dirt.⁹⁶

The reviewers are naturally seldom inclined to go into detail in producing objectionable parts of the novels to which they take exception;⁹⁷ to do otherwise might be regarded as following the hypocritical example of "that illustrious paper" the Daily Telegraph which "when giving the greatest publicity to vice [insists] on the nicest respect to the obligation of reticence".⁹⁸ Occasionally, however, the reviewer feels obliged to draw particular attention to something he finds unacceptable, as for instance, in the Saturday Review's notice

96 Saturday Review, February 11, 1871, p. 189.

97 The reader is left wondering what is meant by such phrases as "perpetual analysis of sexual feeling" - a quality in Ouida's Folle-Farine to which the Spectator reviewer (August 26, 1871) particularly objects.

98 Review of Harry Disney in the Saturday Review, May 27, 1871, p. 673.

of the Florence Marryat book which the Spectator found so distressing:

Another odd feature of this book is Mrs. Ross-Church's apparent unconsciousness of the intensely sensual character of the love she has depicted. Colonel Bainbridge himself, with all his chivalrous devotion for Ethel, adores her merely because she is beautiful. There is not a moral quality, not an intellectual charm so much as hinted at; but there is enough and to spare of 'golden hair', and 'marble skin', and 'perfect forms', and 'chiselled features'. And the naive sensuality of the passage we have quoted ['... his huge muscular limbs were stretched out in perfect rest. "What a Goliath!" thought Lady Ethel as she regarded him ...'] carries out the same thing with Ethel. Her love, too, for Victor de Lacanas seems to have been of the like simply physical kind, and to have been shown in a somewhat more ardent form than is usual with modest-minded, proud-mannered girls.⁹⁹

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For a young man setting out on a career as a novelist in 1871 the path to success is plain (at least insofar as acclaim from the reviewers could be regarded as success). He must work slowly and painstakingly, resisting the temptation to publish frequently. He must possess a style that combines simplicity with vigour, that is polished and refined. He must be able to create characters who live in the reader's mind as real people rather than as abstractions or puppets; the plot must emerge naturally from the characters rather than be a straightjacket into which the characters are obliged to fit.

99 Review of Her Lord and Master in the Saturday Review, March 25, 1871, p. 381.

He must, above all, seek to create a real world, and he may find this easier to do if he concentrates on that part of the world and those kinds of people with which he is most familiar. If he can convey the psychological truth about his characters, preferably obliquely rather than by direct description he will be most likely to succeed. He should avoid any hint of sexual immorality or violence, yet he must strive for completeness and objectivity within the plot limits he has set for himself. His book must convince, should instruct, may amuse, but it must not offend the reader's sensibilities, his taste, nor his credulity.

A man of talent would need to follow most of those signposts; a man of genius might be able to achieve much more without being aware of the existence of all of them or without paying attention to some of those he did know about.

CHAPTER 2

NOVELS AND REVIEWS OF 1881

The situation did not change significantly in the ten years between the publication of Hardy's first and eighth novels. One notable periodical, the Examiner, had died, and several others, none of them ever to become famous, had sprung up to take its place. Certainly the spate of novels had not diminished - indeed the three major weeklies reviewed far more novels in the second half of 1881 than they had done in the first half of 1871.¹ It is true that the average length of a review was significantly shorter in the Athenaeum and the Spectator,² but this is hardly surprising in the light of the new demands for attention. The three had not greatly changed their characteristics: their attitudes and prejudices were much the same; the Athenaeum's reviews were still the shortest and contained much less critical comment, while the other two both continued to include in many instances lengthy excerpts from the novels under review;³ the Athenaeum reviewed promptly, the other two usually dawdled.

1 The figures are: Athenaeum, an increase from 74 to 112; Saturday Review, from 32 to 47; Spectator, from 49 to 65.

2 Respectively, 474 words compared with 587, and 1651 compared with 2136.

3 The Saturday included quotations in just over half the reviews on which I have concentrated in this chapter, with an average length for the excerpts of 249 words (237 in 1871); the Spectator had quotations in two-thirds of its reviews, averaging 759 words (as compared with 588), including one of more than 1600 words.

Of the one hundred and twelve novels reviewed by the Athenaeum in these six months, thirty-five also received notices in the Saturday and the Spectator. Of these, eighteen were of novels that seemed to be, from the reviews, of more than average interest, and these have been used both as a basis for the statistics in the footnotes here and as sources for the actual comments that are quoted in the remainder of the chapter.⁴

Critical opinion had not changed greatly, nor had the demands of the reviewers.⁵ The concern for characters is as great as ever: the reader is told that Alaric Spenceley "is hardly lifelike", and that he is not "one of whom [we] can grow fond". The desire is still to have characters who are not only well drawn but admirable: the Spectator's view of Alaric Spenceley⁶ makes this clear, for even though the author's sense of humour, power of description and sense of high purpose are all in evidence, yet

4 The volume numbers in 1881 for the periodicals dealt with in this chapter are as follows: Athenaeum, January-June, 1881 (i), and July-December, 1881 (ii); Saturday Review, January-June, li, and July-December, lii; Spectator, January-December, liv.

5 Nor had the differences of opinion: in two reviews of By the Tiber we read, "The author has been unable to resist what must be a sore temptation to inexperienced novelists - to desire to tell all about her persons" (Athenaeum, October 22, 1881, p. 526) and "The great fault of the book is that the reader is not told enough about the people" (Spectator, February 4, 1882, p. 160).

6 February 11, 1882, p. 210.

they are marred by ... the fact that the characters which really live are the common-place and tiresome ones, the nobler ones tend towards shadows or abstractions.

The critics are, however, fair to the extent that if they allow an unsatisfactory flaw in character-drawing to counter-balance many virtues, they are also willing to allow one good character to compensate for many vices. After dealing most severely with The Senior Partner, for example, the Saturday reviewer can go on:

What, then, is it that saves this novel from being utterly detestable? It is rescued from meanness and contempt by one character, and by one character alone ... so well drawn, and, in spite of all his faults and all his littlenesses ... at bottom so loveable a character, that, even if he had not held a very prominent place, he would have gone far to save the book.⁷

The Spectator makes the same allowance in a more generalized form:

There is no "upper air" in the novel, the atmosphere is almost uniformly murky, ... but there is a force of characterization in the tale that impels the reader onward.⁸

The desire for pleasantness in these fictional characters occasionally leads to an extreme judgment, as when the Saturday⁹ commends Mrs. Lynn Linton's My Love! not only

7 March 25, 1882, p. 375.

8 January 14, 1882, p. 54.

9 August 13, 1881, p. 212.

because there is not "any offensive parade of antagonism to religion", but also because

she has always taken some pains to show the more amiable side of her least amiable characters. Even the malignant mother of Mrs. Latrobe comes out to decided advantage on her death-bed.

Whether characters are amiable or repulsive is of less account, however, than the consideration of their being real, and the anonymous and fledgling author of The Dingy House at Kensington is encouraged by the Saturday¹⁰ with praise for her "strong grasp of character" for this is, after all, a quality that is "certainly more valuable to the novelist than the power of elaborating an ingenious plot".

That a plot, whether ingenious or straightforward, is still a requirement, however, is evident from the castigation meted out by the Saturday¹¹ against William Westall's The Old Factory:

In spite of a more than sufficiently common practice to the contrary, a novel is supposed to require a plot, or at least a coherent story, and The Old Factory is nearly destitute of anything of the kind. There is a story in the three volumes but it is very far from filling them.

There is encouragement elsewhere of another, more attractive, kind for the author who knowing that he does not have sufficient plot for three volumes limits himself to two:

10 December 17, 1881, p. 767.

11 November 26, 1881, p. 670.

the Saturday¹² notice of The Missing Proofs offers this piece of merriment:

What a relief it always is to escape the third volume, and how well inclined we from the very first feel towards a writer who shows that she intends to let us off so easily! A short visit to one's dentist is a great delight, and so is a quick passage across the Channel. Perhaps a greater delight even than these is a sermon that lasts but ten minutes when we had looked for one that would keep us at least three-quarters of an hour. But to the reviewer, pleasanter even than [these] ... is a novel that is shorn of its third volume. We take it up with a feeling of good-will, we begin to read it in the hope that we shall be pleased, and ... we lay it down with some feeling of gratitude towards an author who has bestowed on us but two-thirds of his tediousness.

It is evident that novel-reviewing is still not being taken very seriously. Nor are there very many references in these reviews to questions of art or style or technique, beyond the usual praise of clarity and straightforward writing - "the unquestionable advantage of being very easily read".¹³ The only occasion in these reviews on which the matter of art is raised is in the Spectator's notice¹⁴ of The Dingy House at Kensington where the reviewer commends the novice - "the virgin novelist" - for an "interest in human character" but goes on to issue a warning:

There is a quality about [this] novel which suggests that the persons and minor incidents of the story are substantially derived from reminiscences of actual experiences. That is, no doubt, the case with most good novels; but experience enables the writer so to

12 October 15, 1881, p. 491.

13 Saturday Review, notice of Alaric Spenceley.

14 October 29, 1881, p. 1371.

modify his notes of real events and characters as to reduce them to the texture and tone which belong to the story as an homogeneous work of art. There never was a real human character so simple or so pliable, that its unmodified importation into a work of art would not disorganize and discolour the artistic structure. Our anonymous author has not entirely succeeded in reducing her real people to artistic order.

There is, however, a concern for form implicit in other comments that are made: two authors are warned, for example, of what happens when an author has not "formed any definite scheme before beginning to write":¹⁵

The author, as it seems to us, began to write before he had got his materials well in hand, and therefore, throughout the book, he is their slave, instead of their master.¹⁶

In another place an author is admonished for an over-fondness for "what may be called the method of harking back":

That a writer, having drawn us an interesting mise en scène, should go back some way to show how it was produced is a thing allowable and warranted by good examples; but he must not do it three times over as Mr. Westall does ...¹⁷

The only other piece of advice concerning construction is to be found in the Spectator's review of The Missing Proofs¹⁸

15 Athenaeum, notice of By the Tiber.

16 Spectator notice of The Private Secretary, September 17, 1881, p. 1199.

17 Saturday notice of The Old Factory.

18 December 17, 1881, p. 1614.

in which the reader's insistence on having his story told in such a way as to make it appear to be like "real life" is very strongly felt:

... it is highly unsatisfactory to represent people as receiving notes of such importance as to cause them to take desperate measures, and yet never to reveal the contents of the said notes. The reader's legitimate curiosity is balked, and he naturally feels aggrieved. Not to be able to compare motive and action together, and to judge of oneself as to how far a cause is adequate to the effect it produces, is often aggravating enough to a person of an inquiring turn of mind in real life; in a novel it is intolerable!

There are, then, few references to the art of fiction, and there are few also concerning what might be called the uses of fiction. It is still taken for granted that "the first qualification for a novelist [is] the power to amuse and interest one's reader".¹⁹ There might be "something to think about in a novel", but "not too much",²⁰ and there is certainly room for the author who wishes to move people - so long as it is in the right direction:

19 Athenaeum notice of Four Crochets to a Bar, August 13, 1881, p. 203.

20 Spectator notice of A Grape from a Thorn, December 24, 1881, p. 1652.

... of all the imagined uses of novels, there is none more incontestable than the good that is done by awakening sympathy with the fortunes and misfortunes of the ordinary human beings who surround us.²¹

On the other hand, it appears, it is not the function of the novel to delve too deeply into unpleasantness:

that ... unpleasing elements actually exist in the world is not disputed; but it does not necessarily follow that a three-volume study of them is agreeable, improving, or wholesome;²²

and there is no question in one reviewer's mind that

An absorbing antipathy ... does not help a writer in developing a plot naturally or in describing characters truthfully. ... a novel is not the place for people to air their private piques and grievances ... for the simple reason that the story is apt to be thereby spoilt.²³

When it comes to more detailed considerations of what a novel should or should not contain, there is again little difference in attitude. There are, it is true, two indications that the reviewers have cause to regret their earlier general enthusiasm for scenic descriptions: the Saturday notice of

21 Saturday notice of The Dingy House at Kensington. The review continues along an interesting line: "There is an infinite pathos in the dreary and monotonous existences of average women; creatures sometimes foolish and sometimes ignorant, but often good with a goodness beyond the power of men; and with a patient cheerfulness that is proof against all tragedies of death and disappointed love, which alone have power to stir the peaceful dulness of their days."

22 Spectator notice of My Love!, July 30, 1881, p. 992.

23 Saturday notice of By the Tiber, December 24, 1881, p. 800.

The Missing Proofs says of its author, "Considering the times in which she lives, she is sparing in her descriptions of nature", and the same magazine ends its review of The Dingy House at Kensington,

The style is good throughout ... happily devoid of any pretence at "word-painting". It sounds incredible, but we do not recollect a single description of a sunset. Praise can no further go.

This is a minor matter, however, compared with such questions as prurience, morality, virtue, or even vulgarity.

A distaste for vulgarity continues to make itself manifest. Occasionally the modern reader is helped to an understanding of what it was that constituted vulgarity for the Victorian reviewer, as when the Spectator critic complains of "the extremely bad manners of Mrs Lynn Linton's people, and the unrestrained vulgarity with which they discuss love-affairs, both behind the backs and to the faces of the individuals concerned".²⁴ For the most part, however, it is a matter of generalized disapproval such as is to be found in the criticism of Four Crochets to a Bar that appeared in the Saturday:

Almost all the characters are very vulgar ... the author certainly shows a wonderful exuberance in vulgarity. The Miss Crochets ... were vulgar, and

24. Notice of My Love!

so was their wealthy brother, and so also were the vicar, and the vicar's wife, the Squire, and the Squire's wife, the doctor and the doctor's assistant, and in fact almost every one whom we can call to mind.²⁵

Vulgarity is one thing that the reviewers still refuse to countenance as a proper ingredient of fiction; suggestiveness is another. The "Ouida school" with its untrue and unwholesome instincts is rebuked in the Athenaeum's notice of By the Tiber, and the Spectator,²⁶ in dismissing a weak novel called King Lazarus, tells the author that "the ruin

25 This attack aroused my curiosity to the extent of inducing me to read the first volume - the book had never before been taken from its shelf in the Bodleian, and most of its pages were unopened - but apart from a general tendency towards gossip, and one use of the expression 'My stars!', it was still difficult to understand the charge. The reviewer, however, was clearly in his most facetious mood when writing his article: some humorous advice to his readers is worth recording as an indication of how little the passage of ten years had affected the reviewers' sense of the tedium of much of their work: "Why did they not at once go further, and get engaged? The answer is that, in the first place, they were only in the first volume ... The inexperienced reader may take our word for it that he will be saved a great deal of time and labour if he will always ascertain with all promptitude who is the hero and who the heroine. In nine cases out of ten this question is answered by the marriage that takes place in the last chapter. Knowing this fact early in the story, he is able to skip over all descriptions of every one but the happy young couple." And later: "The first glimpse of light ... reaches us when we learn that Mrs Lansdowne had had a twin sister. A blessing on twins, we say, and on the wonderful likeness that always exists between them. They have served both author and reader many a good turn already, and will doubtless serve many a good turn yet."

26 August 6, 1881, p. 1023.

of an innocent girl by a roué is an unpleasant and objectionable theme" and that he is not to be congratulated "on having chosen such an one for his subject". Justin McCarthy is taken to task by the Saturday²⁷ in its review of The Comet of a Season for his "unpleasing description" of one of his characters, Lady Vanessa:

"... she had the audacious purity of a savage girl, she once played the part of a saucy page at some private theatricals in her own house, and when the play was over she mingled with the company for the rest of the evening in her page's dress, making fearless and full display of her beautiful legs."

"Mr McCarthy's tact," the Saturday observes, "seems to have deserted him".

In some respects, however, there does seem to be a slightly more tolerant attitude. The Saturday,²⁸ facetiously perhaps but significantly, notes the change:

Our fashionable novels have done a good deal in leading us to form very lenient judgments of men and things, but they have scarcely reconciled us yet to bigamy. Our education, however is going on very steadily, and no doubt in a few more years our old prejudices will have disappeared.

The reviewers still maintain high standards, nevertheless, on matters of retribution for vice, and indelicacy: both the Saturday and the Spectator condemn By the Tiber accordingly:

27 November 26, 1881, p. 674.

28 Notice of Four Crochets to a Bar.

She soon afterwards makes a marriage of convenience with a man whom she despises, keeping the handsome gardener as her lover. It may be that such things happen in Italy and other countries, but there is something unpardonably indelicate and repulsive in making an intrigue of this sort of a leading feature of a book presumably intended for general circulation.

and

The worst of it is, however, that all the guilty people are allowed to go scot-free, which is all the more astonishing, because of the detestation in which the author evidently holds them. Why then, does she not make them suffer condign chastisement?²⁹

A note of tolerance is, however, present here and there.

The Athenaeum,³⁰ for example, is prepared to concede that Mrs Linton's My Love! has great virtues in spite of the fact that she "has devoted herself with much success to the portraiture of some of the baser passions, such as selfishness, meanness, hypocracy, and ill-temper ..." and is willing to go so far as to recommend it in these words:

it must be noted that ... there is not a dull page in her novel, though there are many that are

29. The fact that the reviewers can still take space for small quibbles is also illustrated in these two reviews: the Saturday devotes a whole paragraph to pointing out mistakes in the author's Italian, and the Spectator takes her to task for "sending [a lady] to market to buy fruit and vegetables 'for the week'", adding "We should be very sorry not to have a fresh stock of those perishable articles oftener than once in seven days in so hot a climate."

30. July 9, 1881, p. 43.

disagreeable ... [It] is, in fact, an unusually able and impressive book, its unattractive purpose notwithstanding.³¹

A Spectator reviewer demonstrates his willingness to read about unpalatable things when there is a powerful compensating merit: in a notice of The Old Factory,³² he writes a paragraph that, mutatis mutandis, would make a sound comment on much of Hardy's work:

Mr Westall understands and makes his readers understand a passed-away life ... [he] can describe [the old Lancashire manufacturers] most vividly ... as real as any hero in Mr Smiles's endless biographies; and he can do something more. He can paint atmosphere. There are entire pages in the first half ... which, read by themselves, are dull and even tedious, but read in their place, make up a whole which has helped completely to satisfy the reader's mind. He knows when he has finished them what that life looked like, and felt like, and was; who were the figures in it, what they wanted, what they feared, how they achieved their ends, and to what extent their views were well-founded. The sordidness of this life, its horrid bleakness, so to speak, yet its fullness, its strong purpose, its dramatic excitement, come vividly before the eye ...

The most striking example of a willingness to allow for extenuating circumstances is to be found in two of the three reviews of an anonymous novel called The Private Secretary.

The Athenaeum³³ gives the predictable verdict:

31 My italics. That there is not unanimity, however, can be seen from the following comment in the Spectator's review: "Self-sacrifice, and conjugal and filial affections are in themselves holy and beautiful things, and we dislike their being brought into disrepute by being lavished on an utterly unworthy object like Mr. Branscombe; nor do we think that the placing them in such a light has a healthy tendency ..."

32 November 12, 1881, p. 1438.

33 September 24, 1881, p. 396.

That such an able writer could make so fatal a mistake as that which he has committed in his new book is the most remarkable thing about it. ... There is some talk about the meaning of marriage ceremonies, and at last, out of self-sacrifice and gratitude, the heroine consents to give herself to the hero without marriage ... the many pages in which the author labours to make the reader understand, and so pardon, both the hero and the heroine are thrown away. That the man should have demanded the sacrifice and that the heroine should have made it remain improbable ... an incurable defect.

That the "many pages" were not "thrown away" on other readers is to be seen from the reviews in the other two weeklies.

The Saturday³⁴ acknowledges that "moralists might say that her deliberate lapse from virtue deserved retribution in one form or another", but it refrains from making any such demand itself. Instead it concentrates on the author's skill:

He is a man of the world who indulges in tours de force in which inferior artists might undoubtedly be compromised. And if he has formed himself to some extent after French models, he is no imitator or plagiarist. The novel is original from first to last.

The Spectator's reaction is even more unusual, for its reviewer sees little artistic merit in the book and is not prepared to excuse the hero's and heroine's lapses on that account: for him the book is too "imitative and traditional"; far-fetched coincidences "efface the impression of vraisemblance"; and there is a "want of constructive power"; nevertheless the question posed by the crucial decision in the book is treated by the reviewer seriously and tolerantly:

34. October 8, 1881, p. 456.

The reader has learned to regard Hilda with such admiring interest that her surrender affects him almost as a personal shame; and yet he sees that it might have been a blunder if she had been represented as acting otherwise. The allusion to her want of religious faith only comes in casually and by the way, but it is a touch of illuminating art. Apart from considerations which could only appeal to a religious mind, the argument for her lover's plea was logically unanswerable; for the circumstances were such that by giving way to him she could injure none but herself, while she could give unspeakable joy to those dearest to her, and help and comfort to many more.

There is, of course, implicit in this judgment a warning against agnosticism, but by the same token there is a willingness to admit the sense, within her own lights, of what the heroine does. It is a step forward.

That such an instance as this is unusual, however, may be seen from the concerted attack made on W. H. Mallock's A Romance of the Nineteenth Century, a book in which according to the Athenaeum,³⁵ he "introduces with much frankness scenes, situations, motives, and sentiments which have long been strangers in English novels". The Spectator³⁶ in this case makes no allowances:

It is difficult to imagine that this book can have any effect that is not mischievous; and to introduce it into drawing-rooms under the name of a novel, without any warning of the revolting nature of some

35 July 23, 1881, p. 109.

36 July 16, 1881 (rushing to judgment), p. 927.

of its contents, is an insult to ordinary readers. Moreover, its tone is not the tone it affects. There is to our ears a genuine vulgarity of feeling underlying the affected intensity of passion, - a true worship of the worse side of the world ingrained in the very essence of the religious sentiment it contains ...

No doubt this story does pourtray the fearful chaos of a world of strong passions penetrated by no religious beliefs ... But what will be its effect? So far as we can see, it will have no effect beyond revolting the feelings of decent people, and deepening the despair excited by the spectacle of a moral chaos in those who read this book without any faith of their own, but in the hope of obtaining one. Certainly it will present a number of very odious pictures of depraved passions and helpless cravings for the religious power requisite to bind them, to those who read the book from any other motive. It is a book of considerable power, but the power is of a very morbid and unhealthy nature, and the tone is not pure.

The Saturday³⁷ does not even allow that the book is powerful; indeed, it warns its readers that "it has one failing which from any point of view is unforgiveable. It is desperately dull." Its strictures in respect of the book's content, however, are no less severe:

The revolting character of what he has indicated is all the more revolting because he has ineffectively attempted to put a glaze of attraction over things ... The work is, indeed, a curious hodge-podge of would-be smartness, real coarseness, and hysterical sentimentality. To denounce it for being unwholesome, impossible, and as gross in conception as it is clumsy in execution, might be to accord it an importance it does not deserve.

37 Also July 16, 1881, p. 80.

The Athenaeum on the other hand seems to believe that an artistic inadequacy has combined with a deficiency of taste and judgment to produce a disastrous result:

The simple fact is that Mr Mallock has here attempted a task altogether beyond his powers. The character of Cynthia Walters - a girl the dominant note of whose temperament is sensuality rather than passion, but who at the same time has a busy intellect, a refined and cultivated taste, and more than a little grain of conscience to make her sour - is conceivable, and in the hands of a very strong man might have been a success, though whether the success is one possible or desirable in English literature is another question. But ... Mr Mallock has ruined his chance. ... The best advice that can be given him is to call in all the copies of the book.³⁸

The rules for judging disagreeable work seem to be implicit in two opinions concerning A Man of the Day, another

38 Mallock's work was spiritedly defended by the Whitehall Review (October 27, 1881) from "the scathing denunciations of the immaculate Saturday Review". The Whitehall pronounces the book "a great one", and goes on, "We unhesitatingly say that there is nothing in Mr. Mallock's book which the most religious man need fear to read ... There is just this about the book: it is so true to certain lives as to seem positively unnatural in the artificial idea of routine reviewers; just as a tragedian without the orthodox stage walk would probably be withered with contempt. Novels usually represent people as they seem. Of course, characters are made bad and good, but the man who passes for a good fellow in the world is seldom treated otherwise by the novelist. Mr. Mallock represents people as they are, pries into their inmost hearts, and is for ever bringing out something which, though it may shock the Saturday Review, is nevertheless a truth. It may be a fault to lay bare the conscience of humanity in this way, but it is foolish in the extreme to turn away from the spectacle with an affected surprise, as if we did not recognise it as being accurate."

anonymous novel: the Athenaeum³⁹ ends its review by saying that "the authors are evidently well intentioned, but atheism and socialism are dangerous topics in any but a master's hand". The Saturday's⁴⁰ judgment is that

we are unable to find either any constructive merit to compensate for its ethical shortcomings or any moral excellence to atone for its artistic faults.

It is still possible to find the kind of detailed compliment which suggests something of what the reviewers considered the 'ideal' novelist. The following, the Saturday⁴¹ on James Payn and the Spectator⁴² on Justin McCarthy respectively, indicate what the reviewers were looking for:

Mr Payn is one of those fortunate novelists who predispose both readers and reviewers in his favour. For he appears to be gifted with inexhaustible freshness, and his stories are full of varied interest. He constructs a clever plot; he constructs characters who are not only lifelike but full of life; and ... he makes even the slowest of his slow folks ... entertaining.

For certain qualities in Mr Justin McCarthy's novels, his readers may always look with serene confidence. These qualities are more attractive, perhaps to deliberate novel-readers of mature years, than to the devourers of three volumes a day, who do not either

39 September 17, 1881, p. 365.

40 October 1, 1881, p. 430.

41 December 17, 1881, p. 762, notice of A Grape from a Thorn

42 December 31, 1881, p. 1686, notice of The Comet of a Season.

know or care anything about style, but merely dip for story. They include close observation, quiet but effective satire, which always hits its mark, but never offends against good taste; common-sense, without common-place; an "all-round" cultivation of mind, conspicuously absent in many of the glibbest of our purveyors of fiction; a ready, spontaneous humour, which never jokes overtly or assertively but is pleasantly pervading; a happy originality in the choice of subjects, and English so excellent that if one did not care for the story, one must feel that the author's way of telling it is a treat.

Additional information may be had from a gentle rebuke, for the Spectator's notice of King Lazarus offers this advice to the author:

if he will choose a pleasant subject, curtail his sentences, make his conversations more life-like, be sparing in the use of long words and ruthlessly cut out whatever he deems his most eloquent moralisings and finest bits of writing, he may produce a very much better book.

The changes wrought by the passing of ten years, then, are not very significant; so far as the reviews reflect change, it would appear that little had happened to make the reviewers alter their ways. It is true, as will be seen from the sections devoted to them, that George Eliot and Henry James were taking the novel in a new direction, and it seems clear that some novelists were becoming more bold in the choice of their subject-matter (and some reviewers more willing to be tolerant); but these are aberrations. The vast majority of novels were in a mainstream that had not had its course deflected, and critical attitudes were, not surprisingly, adopted that

would serve as a pilot's manual for this broad if shallow channel; it is not the manual's fault if it is inadequate to cope with the demands of the eddies and currents that are to be found in deeper water.

PART TWO
THE RECEPTION OF
HARDY'S NOVELS

1871 - 1881

CHAPTER 3

THREE NOVELS FOR TINSLEY

i. Desperate Remedies

Most of the biographers of Hardy have paid some attention to the critical reception accorded to his writings as they appeared, for the most part drawing on the material in The Life of Thomas Hardy and the reviews collected in Hardy's scrapbook; of that attention much is focussed upon the treatment of the first and last¹ of the novels. This concentration is natural enough, since on the one hand the hostile reception of Jude the Obscure seems to have been one of the crucial events in Hardy's life, and on the other the reviews of Desperate Remedies form the obvious point of departure for any consideration of his contemporary standing and his progress in embarking on a literary career. In addition it appears that Hardy himself was more deeply affected by the treatment of these two novels than by any other contemporary criticism.

The account in the Life of the effect produced on Hardy by the reviews of Desperate Remedies is a curiously inconsistent

1 The last is taken to be Jude the Obscure rather than The Pursuit of The Well-Beloved, since although the latter was finished and published in book form two years after Jude, most of it had been written in 1891 and serialized in the Illustrated London News in 1892.

narrative, explained perhaps by a desire to avoid giving the impression that Hardy was particularly sensitive or at all resentful. There seems little doubt, however, that he was both. The chief cause of the melancholy was the Spectator's review of April 22:

On April 1 Desperate Remedies received a striking review in the Athenæum as being a powerful novel, and on April 13 an even better notice in the Morning Post as being an eminent success. But, alas, on the 22nd the Spectator brought down its heaviest-leaded pastoral staff on the prematurely happy volumes. The reason for this violence being mainly the author's daring to suppose it possible that an unmarried lady owning an estate could have an illegitimate child.

and the reader is told that

[Hardy] remembered, for long years after, how he had read this review as he sat on a stile leading to the eweleaze he had to cross on his way home to Bockhampton. The bitterness of the moment was never forgotten; at the time he wished that he were dead.²

This is a vivid description of a strong reaction, and is either quoted or paraphrased in most biographies. It is not at first sight surprising that Hardy should have been so deeply affected. He was making, after all, a very tentative beginning in a career which he prized - that of the man of letters. His first attempt, The Poor Man and the Lady, had been rejected by two publishers and put on one side, and Desperate Remedies itself had been turned down by Macmillans;

2 The Life, p. 84.

Hardy must have hoped for a warm reception to counteract the earlier disappointing dismissals of the work of so many hours. Not only that but he had ventured more than half his savings on the publication of the work and could not expect to recover any of his outlay if it failed altogether. Another important factor in the episode may well have been Hardy's general state of mind as an author waiting to know how his first published work would be received; as an old man he told an American visitor to Max Gate

" ... I have never put much faith in the efficacy of literary prizes and official rewards. No literary prize can give an author anywhere near the same satisfaction and pleasure as seeing his first book in print. Never will I forget the thrill that ran through me from head to foot when I held my first copy of Desperate Remedies in my hand! I was in a veritable seventh heaven for weeks thereafter."³

The Spectator's castigations were bound to have a crushing effect upon a joyful frame of mind made even more buoyant by the encouragement of the Athenaeum and Morning Post reviews. Matters might have been worse still, however, if Hardy had bought a copy of Vanity Fair at the same time as he bought the Spectator, for it contained a notice, apparently never known by Hardy (nor his biographers) which read simply:

3 Cyril Clemens, My Chat with Thomas Hardy, Webster Grove, Missouri, and London, 1944, pp. 21-22.

Mr. Smollett has told us, 'who bravely dares, must sometimes risk a fall.' Almost every week we see Mr. Tinsley bravely daring on behalf of some sensational author, and the fall thereof is so heavy that we fear it must be very painful. It is, however, a noble piece of self-sacrifice on the part of a publisher, and very probably visions of the Victoria Cross, or some equally deserving order, float before the eyes of the enterprising gentleman in Catharine Street. We fear, however, that any such decoration will be merely bestowed by the grateful hands of eccentric authors, and not by the public, whom he endeavours to storm by such 'Desperate Remedies' as those before us.⁴

Even without having this salt to rub into his wound, however, Hardy was badly hurt, and though the Life suggests with regard to the Spectator's "slating", that "after its first impact, which was with good reason staggering, it does not seem to have worried Hardy much or at any rate for long", it is clear that a scar remained:

... he was surprised some time later by a letter from the reviewer ... showing some regret for his violence. Hardy replied to the letter ... but as it dawned on him that the harm had been done him not through malice but honest wrongheadedness he ceased to harbour resentment, ...⁵

Hardy's own reaction to the reviews he read presents a special case: not only had he a special concern for the fate

4 Vanity Fair, April 22, 1871. (In the text and footnotes, only the dates on which reviews appeared will be given, since this item of information is the most pertinent in this context. Volume and page numbers for all reviews may be found in the second section of the bibliography.) There is, of course, no indication that the reviewer has bothered to read the book.

5 The Life, p. 85.

of this first attempt, but it may well be that his nature was such as to lead him to a gloomier assessment than was justified. Miss Evelyn Hardy suggests that Hardy "ignoring the pleasant articles characteristically pressed inwards the poisoned barbs of the Spectator review,"⁶ and a detached reading of the notices supports the view that there was a certain perversity in Hardy's preoccupation with what the Spectator said. This view is reinforced by considering the origins and 'history' of Desperate Remedies, together with the prevailing ideas of the time, with all of which Hardy must have been much more familiar than any present-day student of his work. He had had plenty of warning.

Desperate Remedies was the direct outcome of an interview Hardy had had in 1869 with George Meredith in his capacity as the principal reader of manuscripts for Chapman and Hall. They had met to discuss Meredith's reaction to Hardy's first prose fiction, The Poor Man and the Lady,⁷ which Meredith was prepared to recommend for publication⁸ but

6 Evelyn Hardy, Thomas Hardy. A Critical Biography, London 1954, p. 99, (my italics).

7 The book had already been rejected by Macmillans.

8 Tinsley in his memoirs says of Meredith: "I have no doubt he now and then found one which he thought would sell, because it contained some kind of popular element suitable to the taste of the general reader; in fact, containing matter that he himself would not stoop to."

which he strongly advised Hardy to "put away for the present" believing that its publication "would be attacked on all sides by the conventional reviewers, and his future injured".⁹ Hardy recalled that he had been advised to "attempt a novel with a purely artistic purpose, giving it a more complicated 'plot' than was attempted with The Poor Man and the Lady".¹⁰ He resolved to follow this advice, and in the autumn and winter of 1869-70 wrote all but the last three or four chapters of his new novel. It certainly had a more complicated plot; indeed, it is, in Virginia Woolf's phrase, "as intricate as a medieval mousetrap."¹¹

In March of 1870 the manuscript was sent to Macmillans. It would be interesting to know why Hardy made Macmillans his first choice at the beginning of his career: a study of their list of these years shows that they were among the most conservative of publishers, concentrating on edifying works of non-fiction and issuing novels only very occasionally, all of which were of the most respectable kind. Alexander Macmillan had, however, gone to considerable trouble in his

9 The Life, p. 61.

10 Ibid., p. 62.

11 In a review of The Early Life of Thomas Hardy in The Nation and Athenaeum, November 24, 1928.

dealings with Hardy over The Poor Man and the Lady, and Hardy may have been encouraged by this kindness to hope that his new work, free as it was from any taint of revolutionary thought, might be well received. He misjudged the situation, and was soon to learn that Desperate Remedies by no means pleased everybody.

Alexander Macmillan sent the manuscript to his reader, John Morley, early in March; a month later came Morley's unequivocal opinion - "Don't touch this" - and on April 5 a letter went to Hardy containing the news of another rebuff. Morley thought the plot was "complex and absolutely impossible" but his main objection was to Miss Aldclyffe's early misfortunes:

"... the story is ruined by the disgusting and absurd outrage which is the key to the mystery. The violation of a young lady at an evening party, [12] and the subsequent birth of a child, is too abominable to be tolerated as the central incident from which the action of the story is to move."¹³

Morley's appraisal is, in fact, so much like a précis of the Spectator review a year later that it is difficult to understand Hardy's consternation when the latter appeared. Both assessments see strong and laudable qualities in the book - Morley's critique begins with praise: "Shows decided

12 This particular detail must have been left out by Hardy in a subsequent re-writing, perhaps at Tinsley's behest.

13 Charles Morgan, The House of Macmillan, London, 1943, pp. 93-94.

talent for invention and construction ... [and] the dialogue is good", and ends in the same way: " ... the book shows power ... beg the writer to discipline himself ... and let us see his next story" - but, for both, the virtues of the book could not counterbalance its unforgivable lapse of taste and judgment. Macmillan's letter of refusal gave another indication of how the novel might be received by reviewers: "it is of far too sensational an order for us to think of publishing it."¹⁴

Hardy's way was still not clear, however, for passing over Chapman and Hall and going directly to one of the least discriminating, and most successful, of novel publishers, he still met objections. On May 3, 1870, a letter was sent informing Hardy that Tinsley's reader had found "rather strong reasons why the book should not be published without some alteration". The nature of the required alteration is not given but some idea may be obtained from the fact that even after the rewriting had been done, the reader still had doubts about Hardy's forthrightness, for Tinsley wrote in December to say that the reader "considers the woman who is Mrs. Mans-
ton's substitute need not be put forward quite so prominently as his mistress. I suppose the reader thinks the word mistress does not sound well, and I agree with him."¹⁵

14 Quoted in R. L. Purdy, Thomas Hardy. A Bibliographical Study, London and New York, 1954, p. 4.

15 Quoted in Purdy, p. 5.

Macmillan was a publisher with a reputation for respectability to maintain; Tinsley was one with a shrewd knowledge of what would be acceptable to the reviewer. Hardy's expectations for Desperate Remedies might well have been adjusted in the light of their reactions. Tinsley told Hardy towards the end of 1871, "You wouldn't have got another man in London to print it! ... 'twas a blood-curdling story!",¹⁶ and Hardy should have known that a sensational novel had to be rich indeed in redeeming qualities if it was to have a chance of avoiding severe stricture. Not only that but he seems to have ignored (or perhaps to have been ignorant of) the generally accepted assumptions concerning upper-class morality. Guerard may be right when he suggests that "when Walter Besant said that no English woman above a certain level ever commits an indiscretion, he was guilty of determined cheerfulness, if not of wilful falsehood,"¹⁷ but very few of Besant's contemporaries would have gone on record as denying his contention. Hardy was already, in a small way, swimming against the tide, and he should not have been surprised that he was splashed.

16 The Life, p. 88

17 A. J. Guerard, Thomas Hardy, The Novels and Stories, London and New York, 1949, p. 36.

In point of fact, however, in comparison with a great many other novels of the day, Desperate Remedies came off very well. The book was published anonymously in three volumes on March 25; the Athenaeum's review appeared a week later. While not overlooking the blemishes in the book, the reviewer leaves no doubt in his readers' minds that its author is a person (about a quarter of the review is taken up with speculating on the sex of the anonymous author) who may do extremely well, and in the usual neatly summarizing final sentence suggests that he may subsequently "write novels only a little, if at all, inferior to the best of the present generation". The plot, however, is distasteful; it is "in many respects an unpleasant story" and "disagreeable, inasmuch as it is full of crimes". There are compensations: though it is unpleasant it is also "powerful", and the reviewer admits that the crimes "are never purposeless, and their revelation comes upon us step by step and is worked out with considerable artistic power". After plot come characters and these "are often exceedingly good: the parish clerk, 'a sort of Bowdlerized rake,' ... is really worthy of George Eliot,¹⁸ and so is the whole cider-making scene at the

18 It is interesting to find this comparison with George Eliot, later to be found with increasing frequency, in the very first criticism of Hardy ever to appear in print.

end of the first volume". The reviewer also likes the way in which the West country dialect is "well managed without being a caricature"; the occasional "very happy hit" among Hardy's scattered aphorisms; and the unusual chapter headings marking the passage of time which "if carefully carried out, as in the present book, [give] an air of reality which is far more satisfactory than the popular mottoes from some book of quotation which form the headings of chapters in nine-tenths of novels." The warning is added that this new and original arrangement could "easily become an affectation" - a warning which Hardy heeded, for he never used the method again.

The Athenaeum has very few complaints to level against the book. "There are a few faults of style and grammar, but very few," the use of "whomsoever" and phrases like "factitious-ly pervasive" is deprecated; and there are a few "technical errors" to do with Hardy's use of legal and medical terms. The "chief blemish" is to be found in "certain expressions" which are "so remarkably coarse" that they seem conclusive evidence to show that the book had been written by a man.¹⁹ The reviewer's reticence prevents him from "further particularizing" so that it is impossible to know which expressions were

19 The main item of evidence to support the contrary view is the author's "close acquaintance ... with the mysteries of the female toilette." One wonders what Hardy's source was.

especially objectionable; at any rate this coarseness is the only fault which stands between him and a very high reputation.

The author of the Athenaeum review was A. J. Butler, who was a contributor to the paper for 35 years while pursuing his career as a civil servant in the Board of Education; he presumably liked Desperate Remedies well enough to take an interest in Hardy's career for although by no means a regular reviewer of novels (his special interests were mountaineering, the Napoleonic campaigns and Dante) he wrote the notices of all but one of his novels published in the period up to 1881. A product of Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge he was only 26 (four years younger than Hardy) when the Desperate Remedies review appeared, and it is perhaps significant that, though coming from so different a background, the young man found nothing in the book so morally reprehensible as to wish to draw attention to it.

The next review to appear, an article of some 2000 words, was the one in the Morning Post of Thursday, April 13. Although it is more than twice the length of the Athenaeum notice, it says a great deal less, following the standard pattern of reviewing in the paper; three paragraphs - an introductory one, a longer one giving an exposition of the plot, and a concluding one ending with a neat final phrase to

summarize the writer's general impression. The introduction is taken up almost entirely with suggesting how great a similarity there is between this new novel and the work of Wilkie Collins; the first sentence plunges right into this theme:

This novel is so moulded alike in its form, its incidents, and its mode of working them out in the manner of Mr. Wilkie Collins, and, truth to say, it has so much of the spirit and vigour peculiar to that writer, that, as it is published with no author's name, we should be inclined from internal evidence to attribute it to no less a person. But as there is in its design, its power, and its elements of success nothing which would derogate from that gentleman's reputation if the book had been published with his name openly appended to it, it must be assumed that the preservation of the anonymous is sufficient proof that it is not a thing of his doing.

and a little later the idea is presented again and elaborated into a series of complimentary remarks:

In a considerable part of the tale there is a development of that analytical process of the detection of crime, or secrets, or mysteries, which are special with the author above mentioned, and on whom it would seem that the writer has to a great extent founded himself. There is no doubt that no little art is displayed in the keeping of the interest by means of a long-drawn defiance of detection against powerful agencies of discovery. ... the surprise [at the end], if not very sudden, is quite adequate to the requirements of [20] semi-sensational fiction ... the progress [of the

20 The reviewer has written earlier that "there is a touch of the sensational in the tale, though it does not absolutely pervade it; and there is about the personages and their doings a touch of high-pressure sentiment, which, however, does not become unduly oppressive."

narrative] never drags, nor should a capacity for dealing with minute details of events and actions which is exhibited be omitted in a statement of the merits of the constructor.

Clearly the reviewer sees Desperate Remedies primarily as a detective story in the Moonstone tradition, but in seeking to summarize the plot he emphasizes the romantic nature of the book: "... it may be said that the text of the tale is the experience - in other words, the love course - of Cytherea Graye and Edward Springrove". In a synopsis that would irritate most modern readers by its disclosure of so much of the plot, the story of Cytherea and her background is given, from her father's disappointed courtship of the first Cytherea to the point where Edward and Owen arrive in Southampton to confront Manston with his bigamy and "to carry off the bride and wife". The mystery²¹ surrounding Miss Aldclyffe and her connection with Manston is referred to sufficiently often to enable any perceptive reader to guess at their relationship, and it is made clear that they are the two most interesting characters in the book: Miss Aldclyffe is "more than the remains of magnificent beauty, imperious, slightly eccentric, and has evidently a skeleton in one of the closets of her magnificent house", while Manston is "handsome, agreeable,

21 In one place it is surprisingly called the "mysticism".

and indeed, to women, fascinating; but he is sensuous, unprincipled, and in short becomes, in proper season, the villain of the story".

Little is given by way of assessment of the literary quality of the work. The reader is told that although the story deals with "a very risky set of circumstances" (the bigamous marriage) it is written in such a way "as to keep the interest of the moment up to the highest; the action is so rapid, and the emotions of all the persons engaged being powerfully delineated". But that is all, except for the last sentence, "... leaving the story at the juncture of its interest, we will conclude by a statement that, of its special kind, as a work of fiction, it is eminently a success." The Morning Post review is alone in making no reference to the rural setting of the main part of the plot and, consequently, in expressing no satisfaction with the success of the descriptions of rural life; nor has it any concern for Hardy's style or skill with dialogue. It is, in fact, a typical review of its kind, giving enough of the plot to enable a reader to judge whether this is the kind of book that interests him, and then offering just enough in the way of critical judgment to let him know if it is worth bothering with. It can have been of little value to the new author, except as a rather insubstantial bolster for his spirits.

There is nothing to suggest that Hardy ever knew of the existence of the next review to appear, that in the Echo for Friday, April 21. It is not in his scrapbook, and it is not referred to in the Life; nor is it mentioned in any other biography. It is a pity that it was not drawn to his attention, not only because its generous praise might have helped to counteract the blow which the Spectator was to deal him the following day, but also because it contained a usefully constructive criticism of his style.

The review began in a most encouraging way:

If "Desperate Remedies" is a first novel, as the title-page would lead us to think we may indeed congratulate the author on having achieved a decided success. It is a very clever story, and one of the most interesting that we have read in a long time. We do not think that this is the highest praise that can be given to a novel, for we should not bestow it, for instance, on two masterpieces of modern English fiction, Esmond and Romola; but, nevertheless, the power of enchaining the reader's attention and keeping him restless for a solution ... is anything but a slight gift.

"Excellence of construction" is the most striking merit of the book, but it is not the only one, and the reviewer goes on to praise the author's ability to create and handle his characters, in particular "the skill with which, here and there, a passing mood or emotional episode is brought vividly and forcibly before us in a few simple touches".

There is no attempt to summarize the plot of the book, since to do so would "only spoil the pleasure which all will

find in it", but the reader is told that the interest rests partly on the old tale of a thwarted true love, and, far more, on the mystery surrounding Mrs. Manston's fate. No special mention is made of the descriptions of Miss Aldclyffe or of rural life; the praise is more general, culminating in the final sentences of the review:

... "Desperate Remedies", both for its conception and execution must take a very good place amongst the novels of the day; and the novel-reading public may rejoice in the acquisition of a new minister. The author has done very well indeed; we believe that he has it in him to do still better, and hope that before long we may have the pleasure of meeting him again.

The middle portion of the review, however, it taken up with a criticism of some blemishes of Hardy's style: "his first fifteen pages or so are enough to frighten any reader off the book. Such eccentricities of language we never came across before." Three examples of what the reviewer objects to are given, and serve to remind a modern reader that some passages in Hardy which seem clumsy and awkward now struck his contemporaries in the same way. The three examples quoted in the review are from descriptions of Ambrose Graye, "the lady of his love", and his daughter Cytherea, and include some of Hardy's most peculiar circumlocutions: Graye, for example, is said to have "a volatility of thought which exercised on homeliness, was humour; on nature, picturesqueness;

on abstractions, poetry. Being, as a rule, broadcast, it was all three."²² The reviewer simply adds, "This may very likely mean something, but we have not the faintest idea what." In Miss Aldclyffe's²³ case it is the sentence "The present seemed enough for her without cumulative hope"²⁴ which draws a rebuke; in Cytherea's it is the lengthy description of her which begins "Motion was her specialty, whether shown in its most extended scale of bodily progression, or minutely, as in the uplifting of her eyelids. ..." ²⁵

The reviewer observes, however, that these "curiosities of style" tend to disappear as the plot progresses:

It is curious how completely the writer, when once he has got into the full swing of his story, manages to shake off his blundering incapacity to find the words he wants. Not only through the rest of the book does he say clearly what he means, but he has several touches of real felicity.²⁶

22 Desperate Remedies, p. 1.

23 At this point in the story she is called Cytherea Bradleigh.

24 Ibid., p. 3.

25 Ibid., p. 7.

26 These are not so much felicities of style as aphorisms which the reviewer finds agreeable. Modern readers may well find them as trite as Christmas cracker mottoes - for example the following, which is regarded as "excellent": "A great statesman thinks several times, and acts; a young lady acts, and thinks several times." (Ibid., p. 159.)

It has been suggested already²⁷ that Hardy's experiences when trying to arrange for the publication of Desperate Remedies should have prepared him for the criticism contained in the Spectator notice; it might also be observed that if Hardy had been a careful student of novel reviewing he might well have realized that there were things to be thankful for in this review, and that it could have been much worse.²⁸

It would be foolish to overstate this case, for the author is undoubtedly attacked, and readers are "warned against" the book; but there are many reviews in which little or nothing can be found to redeem a novel, whereas here the critic can point to quite substantial talent. In addition it should be noticed that a great deal of the hostility is directed against the choice of subject matter and not against the novelist's lack of skill. This is an important distinction (and ought to have carried much weight with Hardy) not only because the author himself was by no means committed to such subject matter, having had it thrust upon him as it were by Meredith's advice, but because there was clearly a multitude

27 pp. 78-83 above.

28 This observation applies also to Hardy's biographers who simply reiterate that the review was a bad one (Douglas Brown for example [Thomas Hardy, London, 1954, p. 8] says simply, "The Spectator's review, however, was bitterly hostile to the novel.") One is left with the impression that the review is comparable with the Quarterly's famous attacks on "Endymion", and Tennyson's Poems of 1832.

of readers who cared little that a book included murder or an illegitimate child born to a lady, so long as it was well written.²⁹

The review begins sharply enough, but compared with other reviews there is a certain hollowness or artificiality to the rhetoric that prevents it from ringing quite true, or from being completely convincing:

This is an absolutely anonymous story: no falling back on previous works which might give a clue to the authorship, and no assumption of a nom de plume which might, at some future time, disgrace the family name, and still more, the Christian name of a repentant and remorseful novelist - and very right too. By all means let him bury the secret in the profoundest depths of his own heart, out of reach, if possible, of his own consciousness. The law is hardly just which prevents Tinsley brothers from concealing their participation.³⁰

Almost at once, however, it becomes emmeshed in a wordy and abstruse disquisition on the subject of motives for writing novels: it centres upon the proposition that

29. Bleak House, after all contains both of these 'objectionable' features; one wonders what the Spectator reviewer thought of it.
30. Evelyn Hardy curiously misinterprets this sentence: ignoring the irony, she says in her summary of the Spectator review (op. cit., p. 99) that it suggests "that the law which allowed the publisher to issue it anonymously was 'hardly just'." She goes on to suggest that the reviewer might have detected "the youth of the author", which, considering that Hardy was 30 when he wrote the book, seems somewhat over-indulgent.

"we never heard of a man who got himself into difficulties by refusing to write a novel which no one but himself has had any thought of his writing". The reviewer can think of only two excuses for the author, "either that his story is justifiable, or that he cannot do a better description of work". The author cannot expect the public to accept either, firstly because "he can scarcely uphold deliberately the propriety of encouraging ... low curiosity about the detail of crime", and secondly because it is clear that the author is capable of better work. The writer of the review is pained to find that there "are no fine characters, no original ones to extend one's knowledge of human nature, no display of passion except of the brute kind, no pictures of Christian virtue, unless the perfections of a stock-heroine are such; even the intricacies of the plot show no transcendent talent for arrangement of complicated ... facts."

The reviewer goes on, though, to "dwell on the one or two redeeming features" in the hope that "should our notice come under the eye of the author [it may] spur him to better things in the future than these 'desperate remedies' which he has adopted for ennui or an emaciated purse". The redeeming features are quite substantial, much more so than those which many other reviewers of many other novels were able to scrape together to sweeten a sour notice.

There is ... an unusual and very happy facility in catching and fixing phases of peasant life, in producing for us not the manners and language only, but the thought - if it can be dignified with the name of thought - and the simple humour of consequential village worthies and gaping village rustics ... The scenes allotted to these humble actors are few and slight, but they indicate powers that might and ought to be extended largely in this direction, instead of being prostituted to the purposes of idle prying into the ways of wickedness.

After two lengthy³¹ quotations from descriptions of rustic scenes,³² to one of which is added "we wish we had space for the scene-painting as well as the gossip", he cites another "talent of a remarkable kind, - sensitiveness to scenic and atmospheric effects, and to their influence on the mind, and the power of rousing similar sensitiveness in his readers. ... the power, with a few effective strokes, not only of giving the physical aspect of the scene, but of suggesting vividly ... the corresponding mental condition." This talent too is illustrated, by quoting first the description of Cytherea's watching the operation which leads to the accidental death of her father,³³ and then that of the

31 Attention has already been drawn on page 32 to the unusual extent to which the reviewer quotes from the novel. There are four separate long excerpts which together amount to no less than twelve and a half pages of the novel as printed in the first edition: Vol. I, pp. 267-71; Vol. III, pp. 262-7; Vol. I, pp. 16-19; and Vol. I, pp. 34-5.

32 The first is of the scene at the cider-mill (Desperate Remedies, pp. 140-142) and the second is of the bell-ringers for the wedding of Cytherea and Edward (Ibid., pp. 447-9).

33 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

midsummer day on which Cytherea and Owen leave Hocbridge.³⁴ Even this is not enough, however, for the reviewer wishes he had space "for the description of a village fire, and of its silent and steady growth in the autumn night".

There seems to be a certain inconsistency in the mind of the reviewer since having praised the author for "a remarkable talent", his "sensitiveness", and his "power", and having lamented the fact that he is obliged to omit another lengthy quotation, he finishes his review on the same disparaging note as that with which he began it:

The story is disagreeable, and not striking in any way and ... is worked out by machinery always commonplace, and sometimes clumsy. A murder is at the root of it, of course; but though suspected it is only brought home at last by the very dull expedient of a detective seeing the murderer remove the body from the oven in an unused building to a hole in a wood. With a vast superfluity of not remarkably clever invention, two other people, and all three unknown to each other, watch the same proceeding. The merest sensuality is the murderer's only motive, - he has a wife, and wants another, and he even fills the inter-regnum with a mistress. His mother, an unmarried lady of position and fortune, is a miserable creation, - uninteresting, unnatural, and nasty. But we have said enough to warn our readers against this book, and, we hope, to urge the author to write far better ones.

It would be foolish to argue that this is a favourable notice, for the reviewer makes his distaste as explicit as

34: Ibid., p. 18.

he can; yet it might well create an impression which is far from damning in the mind of an objective reader who has no predisposition to avoid stories of murder and intrigue. Not only is the author allowed to speak for himself in quotations from the best parts of the book to the astonishing extent of being given almost two-thirds of the entire review, but attention is paid to unusual talents for describing rustic life and natural phenomena. It would not be unreasonable to go so far as to argue that the reviewer is astute when he puts his finger on some of the weaknesses of the book. He may be wrong about Miss Aldclyffe and ungenerous in his contention that "there are no fine characters"; his preoccupation with the morality of the story may be obtuse; but he is surely right to point out the weaknesses in construction and the clumsiness of the plot. The novel, after all, sets out basically to be a romantic thriller and it is least interesting when it is most concerned with either the romantic or the detective elements in the plot.

The interesting conclusion that the modern reader is tempted to reach is that as well as being the most painful review Hardy read, the Spectator's notice was also the most effective, for Hardy did tend thenceforth to concentrate on and to refine his descriptions of rural life and manners, and

to cultivate his "sensitiveness to scenic and atmospheric effects". At the same time he eschewed sensational and far-fetched plots. It may not be possible to point to Under the Greenwood Tree as the direct outcome, for it is evident³⁵ that some parts of the book had been written before Desperate Remedies; but it is not unreasonable to suppose that Hardy was influenced by the Spectator review to the extent of deciding when he came to revive this earlier work "in the early summer of 1871", to deal this time exclusively with rustic life. The Spectator's was, after all, the only notice to pay a considerable amount of attention to this important element in Desperate Remedies.³⁶

Five reviews had been written within a month of the book's first appearance and then came silence. On June 3, Hardy "received a fresh buffet from circumstance in seeing at Exeter Station Desperate Remedies in Messrs. Smith and Son's surplus catalogue for sale at 2s. 6d. the three volumes".³⁷ It looked as though the book had been "snuffed out". On September 30, however, six months after its

35 cf. Purdy, p. 7.

36 It should be noted, however, that John Morley in his criticism of The Poor Man and the Lady had suggested that the country scenes were the best in the book; The Life (p. 86) says that the "execution [of Under the Greenwood Tree] had arisen" from that remark.

37 The Life, p. 85.

publication,³⁸ Desperate Remedies was noticed in the Saturday Review.

It is assumed that this new review was written by Hardy's friend Horace Moule,³⁹ one of his wisest critics and certainly the reviewer of Under the Greenwood Tree in the Saturday Review. It is not possible to know the truth about this assumption, but it seems reasonable to think that some personal interest on the part of a regular contributor would be involved in having a notice appear so long after a book's publication. There can be no doubt either that the review is the most sympathetic to the book; on the strength of it Hardy persuaded Tinsley to include Desperate Remedies again in his advertisements together with a phrase from the Saturday Review article.

The notice begins positively enough - "Under the rather sensational title of Desperate Remedies, a remarkable story has been written by a nameless author." - but like the Spectator review it lapses almost at once into a long digression, in this case on the inadequacy of much, if not most, of the fiction of the day. This digression leads into the first of many compliments for Hardy's book:

38 An unusually long delay (cf. page 33).

39 The earliest attribution I can find is in W. R. Rutland, Thomas Hardy, 1938, where (p. 52) it is described as being "probably written" by Moule.

... though novels abound of which some individual good thing may be said there are fewer than ever of which one would like to risk the downright opinion that they are worth reading. About Desperate Remedies, however, we should be willing to say as much as that cordially and without hesitation. The plot is worked out with abundant skill.

The reviewer acknowledges that there is more than a trace of the sensation novel in the book ("there are situations well fitted to enchain the fancy of the sincerest lover of melodrama"), but for him this is not the "essence of the book":

The essence of the book is precisely what it ought to be - namely, the evolution of character; and Cytherea Graye, the young beauty, with Miss Aldclyffe, the haughty but affectionate patroness who has a skeleton in the closet, are studies of very unusual merit.

A long paragraph follows in which the male characters are considered in turn: Edward ("not a particularly interesting character") and Owen receive little attention, but Marston (in spite of the pitfalls facing the author who creates "a voluptuary with activity, a very bad form of man, as bad as it is rare") is regarded as being "well done", for "the author of Desperate Remedies has from first to last kept himself well in hand, and he has much too clear an eye for art to indulge himself, as some writers do, in drawing what is hideous or monstrous for mere monstrosity's sake." Crickett and Old Springrove are thought to be attractive, and bring to mind the works of other authors: "The parish clerk ... is drawn something after the idea of Mr. Macey in *Silas Marner*;

and, though he is far from equalling that admirable sketch, yet neither is he a copy, nor does he want life and movement of his own. The sketch [of Old Springrove], like many other touches in this original and careful narrative, reminds us of the close and truthful drawing in Mr. Barnes's delightful Dorset Poems and Homely Rhymes."40 The reviewer's generalization that "none of the male characters come quite up to the women" is a judgment which has since become almost a commonplace of Hardy criticism; but he was the only one to have noticed it at the beginning of Hardy's career.

A very long summary of the plot follows (much the fullest to appear in these reviews) included in which are two quotations from the book, put in to help the narrative rather than offered as proof of ability. Little comment is interspersed in the summary, but the description of the fire which destroys the Three Tranters is warmly praised as being "beyond question masterly ... the various stages of the disaster, from the perfectly quiet and unnoticed premonitions to the rush for bare life at the height of the danger, well deserve to be read as an unusually good specimen of descriptive writing". Later on the conversation between Mrs. Leat

40: This comparison with William Barnes is perhaps another indication that Moule was the reviewer. He was a Dorset man, his father the Vicar of Fordingham, and knew Barnes and his work very well.

and Mrs. Crickett, at the time when Marston's married state is first suspected, is held up as "a good instance of that capital subsidiary writing of which the book is full".

One other description singled out for especial praise is one which, though overlooked by all the other reviewers, strikes the modern reader as one of the most powerful in the book: that of Miss Aldclyffe's coming to Cytherea's room at Knapwater Hall.⁴¹ Guerard in writing about the social background against which Hardy wrote refers to the same episode:

But the British public of 1871 actually was innocent to a rather astonishing degree. In Desperate Remedies there is a scene of Lesbian attachment which even today seems appalling. So inconceivable was the appearance of such a phenomenon in English life or fiction that no reader recognized it as such. Neither very possibly, did Hardy himself.⁴²

The writer in the Saturday Review may have been just as innocent of any knowledge of what the scene involved, but he recognized the quality of the writing:

In the dead of night the haughty mistress follows her; she loves the beautiful girl from whom she has suffered defeat, and a reconciliation soon follows, prolonged through the still hours, and drawn with an effective and analytical power that recalls the manner of George Sand.

41 Desperate Remedies, pp. 86-97.

42 Guerard, p. 36.

It was clearly this scene to which John Morley was referring in April 1870 (in his letter to Macmillans in which he advised them to reject Desperate Remedies) in terms which suggest that he at least was not so unaware of sexual aberration as Guerard supposes: "There are some scenes (e.g. between Miss Aldclyffe and her new maid in bed) which are highly extravagant."⁴³

Apart from any reference to this aspect of the book, however, a reference which is hardly to be expected, there is very little in these early reviews which is not to be found in recent criticism. Even a paucity of comment is common to the past and present reactions, for most recent critics have little to say about it. Edmund Blunden speaks of "some of the landscape painting" as being "quite flourishing specimens of Hardy's genius in the kind";⁴⁴ Douglas Brown calls it a "striking novel" and suggests that "there are masterly touches in the phrasing of the prose, especially the prose of some descriptive passages". Evelyn Hardy, who writes at much the greatest length about the book, sees in it⁴⁵ "passages of

43 Charles Morgan, p. 94.

44 Edmund Blunden, Thomas Hardy, London, 1942, p. 33.

45 Evelyn Hardy, pp. 99 ff.

great beauty [which reveal] certain distinctive traits which the writer was to develop, or which merely lie embedded like fossils in his mature work", among which she notes the first example of "feminine masochism, or self-immolation", the impersonal deity, and the "exquisite descriptions which reveal the countryman's ear and the painter's eye", "the use of similes and metaphors which, at their best, are unsurpassed... a 'vivid exactness'". The latest commentator, Arthur Wing, in the main, covers ground that the early reviews marked out:

Despite its contorted and shifting plot, high-lighting the improbable and its piling-up of coincidence, its nature of being a Victorian whodunit with Aeneas Manston the obvious criminal and the most outrageous of the Mephistopheleans, the novel is immensely entertaining and readable: at times it is sincerely moving: sometimes there is delicacy and grace and felicity in its approach to solemn and subtle matters: ... there is some delightful and typical nonsensical stuff of romance: ... it is occasionally as exciting as a modern detective story: its comic is stronger than its tragic.⁴⁶

His assessment of Miss Aldclyffe also matches some of what was said at the time: "there is no doubt that Hardy scores an early success in this portrayal of an inhibited and frustrated woman".⁴⁷

46 Arthur Wing, Hardy, Edinburgh and London, 1963, p. 29.

47 Ibid., p. 30.

Excluding those comments which spring from the advantages of seeing Desperate Remedies as a part of, and in the light of, Hardy's whole work as a novelist, later critics seem to provide a mixed reception similar in many ways to that which Hardy had to endure in the spring and summer of 1871. He had not really fared badly though. There were thirty-two London papers and periodicals which might have noticed this first work of an anonymous author and six of them chose to do so.⁴⁸ Of the six only one is entirely hostile, and short and pretentious as the Vanity Fair piece is, its influence is not likely to have been great. All the rest are commendatory in varying degree. Two⁴⁹ are reviews which any author, let alone an anonymous beginner, might be glad to receive. Thomas Hardy had not made a bad start.

* * * * *

ii. Under the Greenwood Tree

It seems clear that Hardy did not realize how good a reception his first book had had. He concentrated his mind on

48 There were only nine more reviews for Harry Richmond and Meredith was by this time a well-established writer.

49 Those in the Echo and the Saturday Review.

the Spectator's review⁵⁰ and allowed it to overshadow not only other more complimentary notices but also any knowledge he may have had of contemporary standards of criticism. As a result, when Macmillan sent him an appraisal of the manuscript of his new story that Hardy took to be a refusal, he "threw the MS. into a box with his old poems" and declared to Emma Gifford "that he had banished novel-writing for ever, and was going on with architecture henceforward".⁵¹ The "accomplished critic" to whom Macmillan had sent the manuscript includes in his appraisal a sentence that indicates that Hardy had made reference to the treatment his earlier book had received at the hands of the reviewers: "The writer would do well to shut his ears to the fooleries of critics, which his letter to you proves he does not do".

It may be said, however, that Hardy's despondency was understandable, for, as he thought, Macmillan was refusing a book which his reader described as "a good work [that] would please people whose taste was not ruined by novels of exaggerated action or forced ingenuity".⁵² Since exaggerated

50 In the Life, not only is the whole story told in connection with the publication of Desperate Remedies, but it is referred to twice a little later: on page 88 the reader is told of the book's "slaughter", and on page 91, of its having been "mauled".

51 The Life, p. 86.

52 Ibid.

action and forced ingenuity had been, as he thought, the very qualities in Desperate Remedies that had led to its castigation by the Spectator, he might well be puzzled to know what it was that would satisfy both publisher⁵³ and critic.

The manuscript thrown into the box was that of Under the Greenwood Tree. It was a short, uncomplicated story of rural life written in the early summer of 1871 but incorporating some pages from the 1867 manuscript rejected by Macmillan. Hardy had doubtless been encouraged by John Morley's early praise for the country scenes, and possibly influenced by the attention the rustic parts of Desperate Remedies had received in reviews. His hopes had been raised again, and then, with Macmillan's letter, blighted again almost at once; if it had not been for a chance meeting with Tinsley in March of 1872, it is possible that the book might never have been published. As it was, Tinsley's eagerness⁵⁴ to publish the story Hardy told him was already written was sufficient to sweep Hardy along, and by the beginning of May he was correcting the proofs.

53 Alexander Macmillan in fact offered to look at it again in the spring, even though he feared that "the public will find the tale very slight and rather unexciting" (Purdy, p. 7).

54 Tinsley may well have realized what Hardy had not, that Desperate Remedies had had comparatively friendly treatment; in a letter of March 19, 1872, he suggests that Hardy has no cause to be disheartened (Purdy, p. 332).

In the early summer⁵⁵ the novel appeared in two volumes, and "met with a very kindly and gentle reception".⁵⁶ The adjectives are well chosen, for although no review, apart from that in Vanity Fair, is in the least hostile, yet none is filled with the enthusiasm that is needed to produce a best-seller. Kindliness and gentleness, however, are there in almost every case - perhaps induced by the same qualities in the book itself - but they do not in any instance take the reviewer on to a hearty recommendation. Perhaps this is the reason why Tinsley (who considered it "the best little prose idyll" he had ever read, "as pure and sweet as new-mown hay") had to record that "it did not sell" in spite of its being "one of the best press-noticed books" he had ever published.⁵⁷ He himself put its lack of success down to its not having "the touch of sentiment that lady novel-readers most admire", and thought that "if Mr Hardy could have imported stronger matter for love, laughter and tears [into it] the book would have in no way been unworthy of the pen of George Eliot".⁵⁸

55 The Life: "about the last week in May" (p. 89); Purdy: "it was not announced as ready until 15 June" (p. 8).

56 The Life, p. 89.

57 Tinsley, vol. I, p. 126.

58 Ibid., I, 127.

Its lack of success must stem in part, however, from the fact that the reviewers⁵⁹ were only kind and gentle, and not keen and fervent, in their praise.

A part of the general reticence may arise from the reviewers' remoteness from the world in the story, something which all of them excepting only Moule seem to feel. The fact that the book has a rustic setting is stressed in all of them although not always for the same purpose. Vanity Fair⁶⁰ sees this "mass of ... village jokes, ... tranter's and country parsons" as being "as dull as [it is] unnecessary". On the other hand, another⁶¹ which sees it as "redolent of hayfields and hawthorn" finds that its setting gives it "the merit of being quite unlike anything we have had for many seasons". The Guardian,⁶² while acknowledging that "the sketches are fresh, vigorous and life-like", goes on to say that "the Dutch School ... is not peculiarly attractive to English tastes" and, as a result, suggests that "however faithfully rendered, the details of the social

- 59 Apart perhaps from Moule in his long piece in the Saturday Review.
- 60 October 12, 1872. This is one of three reviews of which no knowledge on Hardy's part is on record, the others being those in the Globe and the Guardian.
- 61 The unidentified review in Hardy's scrapbook, which I have not been able to find in its original setting; perhaps it came from a provincial newspaper.
- 62 October 2, 1872.

habits of village tailors and carriers are rather curious than interesting".

This "more curious than interesting" view of the rustic background is not shared by the critics in the three major weeklies, although each has a different reason for appreciating the setting: the Athenaeum⁶³ because the country is where "the author is clearly on his own ground"; the Spectator⁶⁴ because the country makes it reminiscent of George Eliot's work; the Saturday Review⁶⁵ because the reviewer sees the country described with "power and truthfulness". Hardy may well have been amused, considering the actual origins of the book, to see the Athenaeum reviewer taking the credit for the choice of subject matter:

Our readers may possibly remember that while praising 'Desperate Remedies' for many marks of ability, we especially recommended it for its graphic picture of rustic life ...

... in his new novel he has worked principally that vein of his genius which yields the best produce, and wherein his labours result in more satisfaction to his readers ...

Hardy's awareness of how far back in his own experience and contemplation the book found its inspiration might on the

63 June 15, 1872.

64 November 2, 1872.

65 September 28, 1872.

other hand, have caused him some irritation when he found it ascribed by the Spectator to an imitation of George Eliot:⁶⁶

The more difficult matter of the conversation is managed with skill. In judging of this one has of course [sic] before ones eye the wonderful village talk which the author of "Adam Bede" has evolved out of her consciousness ... No writer need be affronted by being judged by this standard, or need think it a wrong to be set down as a disciple of this school. If it had not been for George Eliot's works, we should not, we are inclined to think, have had Under the Greenwood Tree.

So much for Hardy's knowledge of, sympathy towards, and pre-occupation with Dorset life and landscape. Horace Moule⁶⁷ knew better, and his sympathetic review must have

66 The best-known observation linking George Eliot and Hardy is that which the Spectator made when it ascribed to her the first instalment of Far from the Madding Crowd, but numerous others, at every stage of Hardy's early career, indicate how widespread was the conviction that George Eliot was pre-eminent as a novelist of rustic life. It was taken for granted that no writer could treat the subject without showing himself to be in her debt. In point of fact, there is no evidence that Hardy paid much attention to her novels: he read very little prose fiction, and the only remark he is recorded as having made about her is that she was "not a born storyteller by any means" (The Life, p. 98): "So far as he had read that great thinker she had never touched the life of the fields: her country-people having seemed to him ... more like small townfolk than rustics."

67 Hardy had been careful to see that Moule should be the Saturday reviewer. In a letter to Tinsley in May, he directed him "to see that H.M. Moule be notified when copies of the book are sent to reviewers. ... I am promised that it will be at once asked for - before another member of the staff gets it" (Purdy, p. 332).

meant a good deal for Hardy's morale even if it did little to increase the book's sales. That Moule's point of view is different from that of most of his fellow-reviewers may be inferred from his point of departure: several regard the book as primarily a love story⁶⁸ into which rural scenes have been woven, while others see it as a series of sketches of "country customs linked together by a simple story of ... love";⁶⁹ Moule recommends it, however, as

a series of rural pictures full of life and genuine colouring ... studies of the better class of rustics, men whose isolated lives have not impaired a shrewd common sense and insight, together with a complete independence, set off by native humour.

Under the Greenwood Tree is filled with touches showing the close sympathy with which the writer has watched the life, not only of his fellow-men in the country hamlets, but of woods and fields and all the outward forms of nature. But the staple of the book is made up of personal sketches.

For Moule, Reuben Dewy is "the principal character of the book", and it is noteworthy that all his quotations relate to the activities of Reuben Dewy, or the choir, or Geoffrey Day, none to those of Dick and Fancy. It is true that all the reviews except the Globe's and Vanity Fair's praise one or

68 The Athenaeum says it is "simply the history of a young man's courtship of a young woman".

69 The Guardian.

other of the set pieces (the carol-singing party and the choir deputation to the vicar), but only Moule takes his readers very far beyond a short quotation from them or a sentence or two of praise for them. Most of the reviews refer to the skill with which the rustic characters are presented,⁷⁰ but only Moule goes very far in distinguishing them as individuals and placing each in his proper setting.

Moule considers the book "a novel of great humour and general merit" and suggests that it would make "no bad manual for any one who ... is desirous to learn something of the inner life of a rural parish". "It is", he adds, "a book that might well lie on the table of any well-ordered country house." He goes on from there, however, to raise his one objection - an objection which, as will be shown, Hardy was to encounter frequently in reviews of subsequent books and one that he seems never to have fully understood. It is one that modern readers should bear in mind, since it is easy now to assume that Hardy is accurate at every point. Even among the nine reviews of Under the Greenwood Tree, four of them raise it;⁷¹ Moule does it best:

70 "[They are] sustained in a way that reminds us of the Players in the Midsummer Night's Dream."

71 The four longest, and four of the five in Hardy's scrapbook.

There is also one definite fault in the dialogues, though it makes its appearance only at wide intervals. We mean an occasional tendency of the country folk, not so much to think with something of subtle distinction (for cottagers can do that much more completely than the well-dressed world are apt to suppose), but to express themselves in the author's manner of thought rather than in their own.

This statement of the point has none of the patronizing quality of those that appear elsewhere. The Pall Mall Gazette,⁷² for example, expresses it in a way that must have puzzled and annoyed Hardy:

The only objection that might be made to the book is one greatly to the reader's advantage. The humble heroes and heroines of the tale are much too shrewd, and say too many good things, to be truthful representatives of their prototypes in real life.

The Athenaeum is more specific, but it could still be taken as suggesting that the rustics are merely less subtle than townsfolk, and in doing so may have failed to convey to Hardy the more important point:

As to the faults of the book. First of all, there is the tendency of the author to forget his part, as one may call it, and to make his characters now and then drop their personality, and speak too much like educated people. [There follows, by way of illustration, a conversation between Shiner and Fancy.⁷³] This would have drawn down the house in a comedy by the late Mr. Robertson, but it is not the talk of rustics. A little more observation, or rather cultivation of that gift (which the author possesses in abundance), would show him this ...

72 July 5, 1872.

73 Under the Greenwood Tree, pp. 157-8.

This criticism is the only one levelled at the book by four of its most admiring critics, and it might be thought that Hardy would have understood and heeded it, especially in view of the sympathetic and sensible way in which it is broached by Moule, but it is a criticism that is to recur.

The one point on which there is virtual unanimity is that, apart from the tendency to over-sophistication of expression, the accuracy with which the author describes country life is the book's most notable quality. Every reviewer refers to the novel's sub-title, "A Rural Painting of the Dutch School", and, with one exception, all consider it justified: "Every detail is painted, to employ the writer's metaphor, with minute care and with no little effect".⁷⁴ The painstaking rendering of detail is noted even by those for whom the total picture is not satisfactory - the Dutch School being "not peculiarly attractive to English tastes". The sole dissenting voice is that of the reviewer in the Globe,⁷⁵ who complains that the novel does not live up to its sub-title in one very important respect:

74 Spectator (which, perhaps bearing in mind Desperate Remedies, goes on to add, "it is a very creditable work, and if the word 'Dutch' should suggest the notion, wholly free from coarseness").

75 August 17, 1872.

... [the author] has either not studied the better specimens of Dutch art or he has failed to appreciate the qualities they possess in the highest degree - perfect finish and completeness in idea as in execution. No Terburg or De Hooghe gives the jarring sensation of expectation raised only to be disappointed, no incident is by them half-pourtrayed and left to threaten vague and doubtful consequences.

The reviewer is referring to the last lines of the book, the paragraphs leading up to "'O, 'tis a nightingale,' murmured she, and thought of a secret she should never tell", lines that in his view constitute "a lame and impotent conclusion" that leaves unsatisfied "poetical justice and artistic completeness ... alike".⁷⁶ In making his objection, he is voicing one of those prejudices of the Victorian reader that separate him from his modern counterpart. For the reviewer this threat of "vague and doubtful consequences", this incompleteness, this breaking of the rule that a good story ends with all the knots neatly tied, is unforgivable; for a present day reader the device is a virtue:

This dyspeptic conclusion to a pastoral love idyll; the slight human ugliness of deceit ...; the hinted feminine hypocrisy and capacity for betrayal staining

76 The Pall Mall Gazette complains on somewhat similar grounds that "the love story although prettily told ... is considerably marred by an episode regarding the vicar", since for the reviewer this "destroys the simple character of the tale".

Dick's supreme and innocent serenity; these premature moral irritants lift the novel away from any danger of smugness or complacency about human affairs.⁷⁷

The Globe reviewer has already described Fancy as "as arrant a little flirt as ever spread her nets for unwary man",⁷⁸ but it is plain that in his view the author ought nevertheless, for the sake of a well-rounded conclusion, to forgo any hint of what Fancy's character may lead her to after the story is finished. That no reviewer sees the irony of the ending as a means of lifting or enriching the novel is one difference between the contemporary and the modern view. Another difference is that no one writing at the time pays much attention

77 Wing, p. 44. Henry Reed, in an unpublished M.A. thesis in the University of Birmingham Library, makes a good deal of the last line of the novel in his analysis of Hardy's irony and of his preoccupation with female fickleness in the early novels, a preoccupation that suggests to Reed that Hardy had himself suffered as a result of some hurtful encounter in his own life. It is interesting also that eight years later the reviewer of The Trumpet Major for the Spectator (December 18, 1880) should think back to the ending of Under the Greenwood Tree as a good example of Hardy's skill in tragedy: "How much less effective is that elaborate scene [Eustacia's death] than the simple sentence which concludes the story of 'Under the Greenwood Tree', where the heroine has become the wife of the worthy fellow she does not love, and thinks of 'the secret that she would never tell'. There is genuine heart-break in those words, so gentle and so grievous".

78 Two other reviews refer to Fancy as a "coquette". Moule believed that "the portraiture of Fancy herself conveys a kind of satire of the average character of a girl with good looks, capable of sound and honest affection, but inordinately moved by admiration."

to the novel's being a chronicle of a disappearing age - something which lends it added significance nowadays.⁷⁹

Horace Moule must have known that "the book depicts real, not imaginary scenes, a blending of Dorset life in Hardy's and his parents' and his grandparents' day"⁸⁰ but, for all his praising Hardy's accuracy, there is no reference to the fact that major parts of the book refer to a generation that is passing. The Spectator reviewer hints that the choir's experience is not an uncommon one,⁸¹ but he does not elaborate the point, and the whole body of reviews is devoid of any serious consideration of what the author may have been attempting to do by recording these quaint proceedings⁸² - beyond telling a simple homespun yarn. It is, clearly, not the task of the reviewer to 'read into' any novel a significance beyond the obvious one; if it were, then the writer in

79 All of George Eliot's novels up to this time had been set in the not very remote past and the reviewers would not perhaps see this as an important aspect of Hardy's work.

80 Evelyn Hardy, p. 124.

81 "But did ever a village choir submit to its fate so mildly? We never knew one that did not secede in a body, if not from the church in general, certainly from its own parish church."

82 Cf. all that Douglas Brown writes about the novel (pp. 45 ff.): "The old, stable order is passing from agricultural life: this is the impression made so vivid by the fate of the choir ... In various subtle ways ... Hardy has embroiled [Fancy] in the conflict."

the Pall Mall Gazette might not have been quite so complacent in his recommendation:

It portrays the vicissitudes of a village choir and the loves of a simple pair with so much freshness and originality that those happy persons who have leisure and opportunity to sit "under the greenwood tree" could hardly do better than choose it for a companion.

This neglect, however, is hardly surprising. The book has a good deal to commend it even when it is read in the most superficial way, and the reviewers were content merely to commend it:

the best prose idyl that we have seen for a long while past ... one of unusual merit⁸³

it is not every one who can ... produce from such simple materials a story that shall induce us to give up valuable time in order to see the marriage fairly accomplished.⁸⁴

quite unlike anything we have had for many seasons ... the descriptions are so graphic that you can see each detail as in a Dutch picture.⁸⁵

In these reviews there is nothing to suggest attitudes that are vastly different from those of present-day readers: the reception is by no means either so friendly or so hostile that it seems odd or significant now. The book was much

83 Saturday Review.

84 Athenaeum.

85 The unidentified review.

liked⁸⁶ even if it was not completely understood, just as it is today. Its "kindly and gentle" treatment by the critics must have helped a good deal to confirm Hardy in his career and, more importantly, to demonstrate that simple stories about Dorset life, if well written, were at least as acceptable as other, more common, kinds of fiction.

* * * * *

iii. A Pair of Blue Eyes

Hardy's concern for what the critics said can be seen in the somewhat complicated way in which the early novels came to see the light of day: all of them seem to have reflected the vacillations in Hardy's mind as he tried to guess what the reviewers would most like. A letter to Tinsley written on October 20, 1871, suggests what a muddle had been produced by the mixed reception accorded to Desperate Remedies:

86 One of the most complimentary remarks is to be found in the review of A Pair of Blue Eyes in the Pall Mall Gazette a year later, on October 25, 1873, where the reviewer recalls the book as "abounding with such humour as is only given to men of real genius, and breathing an atmosphere as fresh as spring showers and as pungent as sea spray".

Early in the summer I began, and nearly finished, a little rural story [Under the Greenwood Tree which, as a matter of fact, had already been submitted to Macmillan], but owing to the representation of critic-friends who were taken with D.R., I relinquished that and have proceeded a little way with another, the essence of which is plot, without crime - but on the plan of D.R. The result of the first venture would of course influence me in choosing which to work up with the most care.⁸⁷

It was not until after nine months had passed, and Under the Greenwood Tree had been so well received, that Tinsley brought up again the matter of the "plot, without crime"; in need of a new story for his Magazine, he persuaded Hardy to complete the projected novel and contracted with him for its serialization. The first five-chapter instalment came out in the September 1872 issue. Its appearance as a serial seems to have attracted no attention at all in the columns of reviews of the magazines,⁸⁸ but when

87 Purdy, pp. 11-12; the parenthesis is Purdy's. The "critic-friends" must surely refer to Moule, whose review of Desperate Remedies had appeared less than a month earlier. Hardy's swing to Under the Greenwood Tree and his abandoning it subsequently for the newer idea seem to reflect the desire to please first the Spectator, then Moule. The phrase "of course" in the final sentence quoted is especially revealing.

88 Tinsleys' was by no means one of the monthlies to which the reviewers paid a good deal of attention in their sections devoted to "The Magazines", and the absence of any reference to the new serial is not in the least surprising. It contrasts very strongly, however, with what was to happen in the case of Far from the Madding Crowd.

it came out in three volumes late in May 1873, it became the subject of eight reviews, most of them lengthy and all of them complimentary.

It is not fanciful to suggest that the critical reception of A Pair of Blue Eyes has not received the attention it merits. Guided perhaps by the fact that the Life does not dwell on the reviews,⁸⁹ those later writers who refer to it at all do so in such phrases as "the critical reception was favourable",⁹⁰ "the reviewers were gracious",⁹¹ "a friendly reception",⁹² and then pass on to remark that it was a great favourite with Patmore and Tennyson. Hardy himself may have allowed the memory of the reception of Far from the Madding Crowd, undoubtedly the beginning of his real break-through to a wide public, to dispel the earlier one, and later writers may have allowed their preference for Far from the Madding Crowd as a novel to prevent them from examining closely the reception of the book that is inferior

89 Reference is made to the Spectator's "commendatory review" (p. 93), we are told that the success of the book surpassed Hardy's expectations (p. 95), and a highly complimentary sentence is quoted from the Saturday's article, but that is all.

90 Purdy, p. 12.

91 Blunden, p. 38.

92 Weber, p. 56.

in almost every way. Yet the fact is that so far as reviews are concerned, Hardy's eminence dates from A Pair of Blue Eyes, and it is inconceivable that the enthusiasm with which it was received did not affect him profoundly and help to confirm his choice of novel-writing as a profession. There is also the more subtle consideration, considering Hardy's later development, that the book was well received in spite of the extent to which it contains gloom, uncertainty and not a little cynicism - especially with regard to feminine virtue. Finally, the explanation of the fact that the reviewers of 1873 liked it far more than writers of the present day⁹³ should help in any consideration of Victorian taste as compared with neo-Elizabethan.

The strength of the reception may be most clearly demonstrated by quoting the most commendatory sentences from several of the reviews:

This book abundantly confirms us in the high estimate of Mr Hardy's powers which we had formed from his previous stories. ... There is nothing in it to which we could take exception, or even wish to improve ... except the title ... and an occasional affectation of phrase ... We have no space to draw attention to the

93 The difference between the contemporary and the modern assessments is most marked in four of the novels dealt with in this thesis: A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Trumpet-Major, and A Laodicean, all of which we would consider to have been overrated, and The Return of the Native, which we hold in much higher esteem than did the critics of 1878.

many perfections of this book, which unquestionably places its author in the first ranks of writers of high-class fiction of our day.⁹⁴

In short, any one who takes up this well-written, lively, and amusing tale will be unwilling to put it down till he reaches the end, and will probably place it, as we do, among the pleasantest books of the season.⁹⁵

... one of the most artistically constructed among recent novels. And, from considerations affecting higher matters than mere construction we would assign it a very high place among works of its class. [The author] is a writer who to a singular purity of thought and intention unites great power of imagination.⁹⁶

... we scarcely know whether we are now most impressed by our unexpected good fortune in his valuable accession to the higher ranks of modern novel-writing authors, or by the rapid strides which he has made, each time, in the direction of improvement. His third [book] has risen to the rank of those which show, not only quick observation, and sparkling humour, and true moral instinct, but a delicate and subtle analysis of character and moods of feeling, a poet's sympathy with human passion when tuned to its sweetest or saddest notes, and an artist's eye for every aspect of nature.⁹⁷

We are very careful how we use the word "genius;" but we have no hesitation in saying of the author of "A Pair of Blue Eyes" and "Under the Greenwood Tree" that he is distinctly a man of genius; there is in these books more inborn strength, more inborn knowledge, more of that

94 Graphic, July 12, 1873.

95 Morning Post, August 4, 1873.

96 Saturday Review, August 2, 1873.

97 Spectator, June 28, 1873.

fine humour which is the mark and test of genius, that we are able to detect in any living English novelist of our acquaintance: one only excepted. ... But the author whom we are now praising is young; and that fact is visible in his work. If he has growth in him, he will be heard of to his own great advantage by-and-by.⁹⁸

The other three reviews, in the Times,⁹⁹ the Athenaeum,¹⁰⁰ and the Court Journal,¹⁰¹ contained nothing as enthusiastic as any of these, but all of them had very kind things to say about the new book.

What was it about A Pair of Blue Eyes that so pleased the reviewers? It certainly was not its title, for this came in for an unusual amount of criticism;¹⁰² and while the appeal of the rural setting is still present, it gives way to a serious interest in a Hardy heroine - the first instance of such a thing. Several reviewers comment on other merits of the book (especially is this true of Horace Moule¹⁰³ in

98 Pall Mall Gazette, October 25, 1873.

99 September 9, 1873.

100 June 28, 1873.

101 June 21, 1873.

102 "Weak and sentimental" according to the Pall Mall Gazette; "silly and unmeaning" - Graphic; "the weakest point in the book, absolutely injurious to its success" - Spectator. One wonders whether Hardy's earlier title, A Winning Tongue Had He, would have proved more acceptable.

103 For all Hardy's denials of autobiographical elements in the novel, Stephen Smith's veneration of Knight must surely be a very direct expression of Hardy's feeling for Moule.

the Saturday whose review is, for the modern reader, remarkably penetrating), but all of them are struck by Elfride.

Guerard's "Genealogy of Hardy's Younger Women"¹⁰⁴ suggests that the category into which Elfride falls - The Vain and Fickle - is virtually confined to Hardy's earliest work, and that Elfride is the last of the early heroines who falls entirely into the category. This in turn suggests that she might be the most fully worked-out example of her species. The Victorian critics on the whole agree, but they are more willing than Guerard, and other modern writers, to allow her a share of qualities other than vanity and fickleness. Even the cursory notice in the Court Journal, fewer than two hundred words in length, takes up a good deal of its space to describe Elfride: "an ethereal, fascinating, impulsive girl" for whom the author "speedily [enlists] the reader's sympathy" and whose "actual constancy though apparent fickleness [and] premature death ... awake ... sincere sympathy".

The sympathies of the Athenaeum's reviewer are by no means so fully engaged, yet, after suggesting that "Mr Hardy's feminine ideal is not lofty, though perilously attractive", he writes with perceptiveness of Elfride's "personal charms".¹⁰⁵

104 : Thomas Hardy, p. 141.

105 See page 133 below.

This "ethereal, fascinating, impulsive girl" is seen by the Times reviewer as one who "through all the two years of love and love-making of which this novel is the record ... has acted with extraordinary folly and extraordinary deceit". The Times review is perhaps not meant to be taken entirely seriously, however, for it adopts a mocking tone throughout:

Mr Hardy's heroine is undoubtedly fickle, but she is brought to a sad end, and so we are persuaded to forgive her ...

Nothing better, perhaps, could have been expected from a young lady christened Elfride ...

... [she] speaks ever after of her excursion as a horrible crime, though it was no such thing, but only foolish to the last degree, the pair of lovers being as innocent of harm as the babes in the wood.

It is true that Mrs Jethway had "red and scaly eyelids and glistening eyes", but still how could she see from Plymouth to London.

Novel readers are indulgent judges, and who can be angry with the fickleness of a heroine who, before the story ends, has "gone down into silence", and shut her bright eyes for ever?

This review is not in Hardy's scrapbook, and if this means, as it seems to, that Hardy did not see it, there is some cause for relief, not simply because of the pain that so frivolous¹⁰⁶ an approach might have caused him, nor just because of the reviewer's castigation of the "nonsense" that

106 The same tone pervades the other reviews in the same column. We read: "Elsie is a fair and comely heroine, blessed withal by a portion of sound common sense such as rarely falls to the lot of damsels in her walk of literature" (A Slip in the Fens).

comes from the author's love of "fine and difficult, not to say ridiculous, phrases", but also because it seems possible that Hardy might have been discouraged by the influential 'Trumpeter' from writing again about a vain and changeable woman.

The Times stands in contrast to the other reviews in its lack of enthusiasm, but even it pays tribute, as the Court Journal had done,¹⁰⁷ to Hardy's ability to "draw" his characters "carefully". The Pall Mall Gazette¹⁰⁸ is greatly impressed also by the way in which, compared to the previous books, "there is exhibited a greater power of mental analysis and knowledge of human nature, too pathetic in its course", and by "the capacity of the story for dramatic representation". Its own analysis of the two chief characters is sharp and revealing:

Elfride ... is placed before us with a few happy touches, which convey at once the possibility of her fate ... nineteen and motherless ... Associating chiefly with elderly people, and more with men than women, she was very innocent of evil and very ignorant of life ... nevertheless femme jusqu'au bout des ongles

107 "The idiosyncrasies of each character are very strongly developed", a view with which many modern readers would agree.

108 "A great power in the Fourth Estate. There was hardly a good house, club, or institution in the three kingdoms where it was not seen and read." Tinsley, vol. I, p. 84.

... if her temper was a little petulant it was still eminently sweet and docile, hating to make unpleasantness or to inflict pain ... she could be frightened into equivocation ... there was a good deal of moral weakness in Elfride. But she was profoundly loveable, especially to men, and she loved to be loved; and these qualities, when combined, confer upon the possessor the potentiality for inflicting terrible pain, and most commonly the certain lot of having to suffer it. It is doubtful whether weakness has not in the world's history caused more crime, disaster, grief and remorse than deliberate cruelty ever did.

There was about this man [Knight] a sharply defined individuality which is consistently preserved throughout the story. He was essentially a product of the present day. A carefully cultivated intellect, a great capacity for work and for taking pains, cool, collected, and self-controlled, and well aware of his advantages. As he became a critic and essayist, he was fastidious in taste and sarcastic and severe in judgment, though more in his writing than his conversation, and least of all in his nature. He was energetic, temperate, knew about most things, yet with all this he was thoroughly kind-hearted, simple-minded, and extremely unused and uninstructed in the ways of women. His masculine attributes attracted Elfride as much as his cool indifference and outspoken frankness piqued her. He rapidly effaced Stephen ... and then learned gradually the lesson that Elfride, weak and childish as she appeared, did nevertheless hold his happiness as it were in the hollow of her hand. ... Men who are inexperienced with the other sex, who have never had sisters or made friends with women older than themselves, are foolishly exigent in this respect. They wish not only to be the first man the girl has loved (a reasonable and even laudable ambition), but they desire to be the first man who has loved the girl - an entirely different thing.

The Graphic is also impressed by Knight's "secluded life and ignorance of women [that] have bred sentimental fancies in his brain", and by the "delightful heroine", and speaks of the "fine studies of character worked out with real power and

subtlety of analysis". The Morning Post, however, is much more elaborate in its description of Elfride, its words both echoing and expanding the paragraph in the Pall Mall Gazette:

If any pen could make a jilt appear charming and attractive, it would be that of Mr Hardy, [109] whose hand has not lost its cunning ... The story ... is a very simple one; but it is told with so much freshness and characteristic drollery ... that it is one of the few novels that can be said to be thoroughly interesting from the beginning ... There is so much individuality about her that we seem to know her little coquetries ... her quaint epigrammatic sayings, and her winning ways, as those of a personal friend. ... No one will read [the story] without recognizing the skill its author has shown in making us like and pity his loveable, fickle, sparkling little heroine ...

The Morning Post devotes more space than the other reviews to the reason for Stephen's downfall in the eyes of Mr Swancourt - his lowly birth - and to Elfride's novel and its reception. Its attitude towards Knight, whom it regards as a prig, is more frivolous than that of most of the others; for this reviewer, he is one of a "class of men ... often introduced into fiction now by way of a pleasing variety to the constantly recurring heavy dragoon and insipid curate who have so long held their own as all-conquering." It echoes the Graphic ("a capital picture") in its fondness for Mr Swancourt, dwelling on the "genial, jovial, attractiveness" of the characterization. Both of these reviews also give

109 A large claim for someone with only two books behind him, it is presumably inspired by memories of Fancy Day.

greater emphasis than the others to the rustics, the Graphic saying that "in his descriptions of village folk ... Mr Hardy seems to excel everyone but George Eliot", and the Morning Post that he presents "the peasantry ... not as stage characters ... but as the genuine natives of the west country, slow of speech, but shrewd in judgment",¹¹⁰ and at least a quarter of the review is given up to quotation and description from the few rustic episodes in the book.

The Athenaeum remains non-committal, devoting a substantial amount of its limited space to Hardy's innovation of putting at the front of the book a list of dramatis personae, an even larger amount to a summary of the plot, and two or three lines to bantering remarks about reviewers ("We thank Mr Hardy for so courteous a method of disarming the critics" and "Mr Knight, like all his fellows, is a Chrichton ..."). Yet it does indicate to the modern readers two or three parts of the book which particularly interested one cultivated nineteenth-century counterpart: the episode on the tombstone (which the reviewer considers worthy of special attention);

110 The charge is renewed, however, that Hardy succumbs again to the "unfortunate habit of making them express themselves in his language, and use some of the long words ... which he introduces with the sort of airy recklessness peculiar to him." The episode involving the Widow Jethway is also regarded as unrealistic, "overstrained and sensational".

the cliff-hanging incident ("... a highly sensational accident ... described, in moving detail, in some harrowing chapters"); and the character of Elfride:

Her chief personal charm is the pair of blue eyes ... and her mental ones are utter inexperience of all the world, with an amiable impulsiveness in all that concerns the tender passion. She is by no means a flirt of set purpose, still less deliberately treacherous, yet her self-consciousness is perpetually being piqued into struggles for mastery over the masculine natures with which she meets, and the result is always that she is hopelessly defeated and bound to each successive conqueror. The author has shown considerable skill in exciting our sympathies for his self-willed young friend, but he cannot prevent her falling into the ordinary entanglements of coquetry, and does not seem to see how very farcical is the total result of her adventures.

The Athenæum's lack of any great sympathy with Elfride and its unconcern for Knight are the exception rather than the rule: the Spectator review that appeared on the same day gives another, far fuller and much more acute, account of the two protagonists:

Our interest in Elfride arises from the subtle union in her character of the extremest purity of conduct and intention, with a timidity which in her loving and ardent nature, that dares not risk its treasure and fatally exaggerates the heinousness of its trifling departures from the prudent and usual course, suggests prevarication and duplicity. Her intellectual acuteness, her physical courage and moral timidity, her devotedness, her utter self-surrender and trust, and yet her exquisite purity of feeling, and the entire absence of vindictiveness at injustice ... is all told, or rather revealed, with such a wonderful insight into a woman's nature, that we are surprised to find as perfect a comprehension of the force and straightforwardness of her lover's utterly different and strictly

manly characteristics. For Knight is no carpet-knight, but quite the reverse, - a lonely, unloving man, an acute, uncompromising critic, of severe rectitude unable to conceive of purity and faithfulness in combination with timidity and vacillation, and therefore harsh and unjust. The union of this harshness and injustice with his deep and tender love, and of his fastidious and jealous exactingness - bred of sensitive refinement and an utter ignorance and seclusion from women - with his chivalrous desire to be lenient and gentle, are portrayed with admirable knowledge and art.

Almost every other character in the book comes in for a share of commendation: Stephen is "admirably drawn, ... very perfect"; the "handsome common-place vicar" and the "kindly step-mother" are "also very good". The writer goes on to say that he could "devote a second review with ease to his admirably true and humorous description of the humble neighbours ... almost worthy of George Eliot". Some detailed attention is paid to Hardy's ability to describe natural scenery "exquisitely", and the review concludes with a lengthy description of Knight's falling over the cliff which is regarded as highly by this reviewer ("It is one of those breathless descriptions which reminds us of Sir Walter Scott, but which shows a far subtler knowledge of the movements of the mind in such a crisis") as it was to be by the one in the Pall Mall Gazette ("We commend this chapter as one of the most careful and vigorously written bits of psychological study we remember").

The quotations from reviews of A Pair of Blue Eyes have been lengthy and numerous because the book has a special place

in the Hardy canon. It is inconceivable that it is not to a large extent autobiographical - if not in minute detail and in incident yet in more general ways - despite Hardy's disclaimers. How much of Moule there is in Knight, how much of Hardy in Stephen Smith, how much of Emma Gifford¹¹¹ in Elfride, is not only impossible to know, but, in a sense, irrelevant also: the important thing is that there is clearly enough connection between fact and fiction to make the book exceptional. In addition to this fact, perhaps indeed because of it, the book was, according to Weber,¹¹² Hardy's favourite,¹¹³ and the fondness for it shown by Tennyson and Coventry Patmore seems to have meant a great deal to its author.

In particular, however, lengthy quotation is necessary to demonstrate why the book was so much more admired in its day than it is now; why it is, as Douglas Brown says, "the most Victorian of his books"; and what there is to justify

111 Or Tryphena Sparks - or both - if the conjectures of Lois Deacon and Terry Coleman (Providence and Mr Hardy, London, 1966, pp. 99-104) are accepted.

112 Op. cit., p. 88.

113 In his letter to George Smith in April 1878 concerning a new edition, Hardy wrote, "There are circumstances in connection with A Pair of Blue Eyes which make me anxious to favour it, even at the expense of profit ..." (Life, p. 113). There are five reviews of the 1877 edition in Hardy's scrapbook.

Edmund Blunden's assertion that Elfride "was all that a nice Girl of the Period should be, in spite of hazardous moments". Of all modern commentators, only Weber makes a strong case for regarding the novel as being worthy of close attention in its own right,¹¹⁴ although others, notably Guerard, take an interest in Elfride as an adumbration of Sue Bridehead or in Knight for the connection with Angel Clare. Most recent critics either pass it by quickly¹¹⁵ or, like Wing, try to make something of it by turning conventional attitudes to it upside-down. Yet in 1873 reviewers loved it: they could find almost nothing wrong with it.

This last statement is demonstrably true. A few reviewers refer, inevitably, to Hardy's peculiarities of phrase, and the Times and the Athenaeum seem not to take the book entirely seriously; but apart from this, and the dissatisfaction with the title, the reviewers have only one objection. Half of them, in true Victorian style,¹¹⁶ regret the unhappy

114 Mainly, one feels, because he values it for its connections with Hardy's life.

115 R. A. Scott-James, (Thomas Hardy, London, 1951, pp. 13-14) includes it with Two on a Tower, The Hand of Ethelberta, and A Laodicean in a list of novels that could be "removed altogether" without much impoverishing "the sum-total of his work". For him, it lacks "the unmistakable, unforgettable note of the essential Hardy" (p. 11).

116 Cf. Guerard, p. 37: "Many Victorians would have preferred no tragedy at all. Charles Darwin disliked unhappy endings and wanted a law passed against them", and many others.

ending.¹¹⁷ The Spectator makes the most eloquent complaint:

We would willingly have compounded for a happier conclusion, by the sacrifice of some of the true artistic consistency and striking dramatic effect. Indeed it is long since we have been so troubled in laying down a story, ... [we are left with] that sense of a sad and helpless indignation.

Even though the ending is "undeniably sad", the Pall Mall Gazette feels bound to recommend the final scene, which "is given with a skill and power which may be emphasized as very exceptional". It is this same final scene, the discovery by Knight and Stephen Smith that Elfride's coffin is on the very train on which they are travelling to see her again, that Lord David Cecil refers to thus: "Such tragic irony appears as a practical joke on the part of the author",¹¹⁸ and which George Wing¹¹⁹ sees as the culmination of "an exquisite ["deliberate and intentional"] example of satirical comedy", and in itself "essentially comic".¹²⁰

Among the features of the book which contemporary reviewers admired, only a few seem worthy of even a brief mention now: the cliff scene (Scott-James and Weber); the

117 A fact that might well have contributed to Gabriel Oak's being allowed to win Bathsheba in the novel that followed, something one does not "expect" from Hardy.

118 Hardy the Novelist, London, new edition 1954, p. 127.

119 Op. cit., pp. 30 and 31.

120 Although he admits that "the last phase of her life as told later by Unity was wreathed with a rare sadness".

fresh and sparkling quality of the descriptions of young love (Wing); the descriptions of natural phenomena (Scott-James and Evelyn Hardy); and interest in Elfride (Evelyn Hardy, Weber and Guerard - but mainly as a part of the development of Hardy's portrayal of women); the authenticity of the central characters (Blunden); the humour (Wing and Cecil). Profound sympathy with Elfride herself,¹²¹ detailed analysis of Knight, enjoyment of the rustics, admiration for Swancourt, the relationship between Stephen and his parents, Swancourt's attitude towards Stephen, the power shown in general in the development and analysis of characters, the inherent drama - all of these are aspects of the novel to which the reviewers devote themselves, sometimes at great length, in the course of recommending it to their readers, yet for recent critics they are not worth consideration, overshadowed, perhaps, by (for them) richer examples of the same things that are to be found in subsequent novels.

Conversely, those parts of A Pair of Blue Eyes that give pain to readers now - melodrama, absurdity, impossible coincidence - appear not to have troubled Hardy's contemporaries at

121 "Who studies this book," wrote the Pall Mall Gazette, "if he has not actually dissected a woman's heart, will at least have 'assisted' in the operation."

all. The Athenæum reviewer sees the farcial side of Elfride's progress through four love affairs, but his view is not shared by any other. The coincidences are never referred to: nowhere in the several thousand words written about the novel is mention made, for example, of what is now regarded as the crudity of construction which has the church tower fall the instant after Elfride has quoted to Knight the line from the psalmist, "Thou hast been my hope, and a strong tower for me against the enemy".

For us, A Pair of Blue Eyes is at best a charming tale that merely hints at Hardy's greatness; for the Spectator reviewer it was

... a really powerful story, well proportioned in its parts, of varied and deep interest, yet not too harrowing for pleasure, relieved by exquisite touches of word-pictures, and supported by characters not too numerous to crowd the stage, and divert us from an attentive study of the three central figures.

There remains one review to examine in some detail, Horace Moule's in the Saturday Review. There can be no doubt that Hardy would place great store by this opinion: not only did he regard Moule as to some extent his mentor¹²²

122 The letters from Moule to Hardy in the Dorset County Museum make it clear that he had been a critic of Hardy's writing long before he had an opportunity to review his printed work. He had also, in a letter of May 21, 1873, written enthusiastically about A Pair of Blue Eyes soon after receiving it from the publisher.

but he had found him a helpful and sympathetic reviewer of his previous novels. In addition Moule knew something of the circumstances in which it had been conceived, and of Hardy's attachment to Emma Gifford (and possibly, if Miss Deacon is right, to Tryphena Sparks). He must also have recognized whatever there was of himself in Knight and must have had this in mind as he wrote. Finally, for Hardy the review must have taken on a particularly poignant significance when Moule, six weeks after its appearance in the Saturday, killed himself in his rooms in Cambridge.

He shares with other reviewers a distaste for Hardy's "oddities of style", and their admiration for Mr. Swancourt ("well drawn") and the rustics, to whom he devotes a very large section of the review after remarking that there are many "sketches of genuine country life, in [the] drawing [of] which he has already shown a master's hand". He also likes the cliff incident ("worked out with extraordinary force") and the way in which the "irony of the situation" in the last four chapters of the book "is worked with remarkable force".

There are, however, three other points made by Moule that, in view of the closeness of his relationship to Hardy, take on extra significance. The first is his reference to Stephen Smith's awareness of class distinctions:

But the peculiar position of Stephen Smith serves for much more than the mere canvas on which to lay these scenes from the remote country. In place of an unreal and nonsensical picture of passion defying the social barriers of actual life, the novel conveys (without the appearance of intending it) a powerful representation of what those barriers are, in fact, and of what, though perhaps in a modified degree, they are likely to remain.

There is every indication that Hardy himself was, for a great part of his life at least, acutely conscious of "social barriers" and it is certain that Moule would have known this. His compliment on Hardy's handling of them in fiction would therefore have been a much valued one, and may, indeed, have been a factor in Hardy's continuing to treat the subject in several subsequent books.

The second special piece is Moule's assessment of Knight. There is no reference to the temperateness, kind-heartedness and self-control seen in him by the reviewer in the Pall Mall Gazette, nor to the tenderness, refinement and gentleness that the Spectator critic sees blended in with less attractive qualities: for Moule he is "the least natural character in the book [who] inclines here and there unmistakably to priggishness" for all that he has also "been the benefactor of Stephen [and] has helped him forward in the world". It is perhaps understandable that a man who could not, presumably, detect any patronizing tone in his own letters to Hardy would regard the patronizing Knight as an unsatisfactory creation and would be disinclined to spend much time on describing him.

The most interesting contribution made by Moule, however, comes in his lengthy general description of the novel. Miss Deacon¹²³ quotes this for her own purposes, and if she is correct in her speculations about the relationship of Moule to Hardy and Tryphena the passage takes on extra importance; but it can be seen as worthy of note even without any reference to any possible personal involvement for it is the earliest and one of the most concise statements of what much of Hardy's work is about - the entanglement of well-meaning people in a net of circumstances. It would be absurd to claim too much for the passage: Moule merely described what it was that he apprehended, he did not invent it. It is possible nevertheless that this simple description from a respected friend and guide, especially if its value was reinforced by that friend's death, might have led Hardy to recognize this phenomenon - the interlacing of character and environment - as one that he was peculiarly able to explore, and that this recognition helped to open the door to the great novels that were to come. Moule's paragraph could, mutatis mutandis, describe almost all of them:

The distinctive feature of this novel is that out of simple materials there has been evolved a result of really tragic power. The whole centres round the figure

123 Op. cit., p. 117

of Elfride, bred in the solitudes of the West country, the motherless and only daughter of a Cornish vicar; and the tragedy consists in the operation of quite ordinary events upon her sensitive and conscious, but perfectly simple nature. By some of his former critics Mr Hardy has been unwisely compared with George Eliot. In reality, no two writers could be more unlike in their general methods. But in one respect there is a decided resemblance - namely, that Mr Hardy has in the book before us developed, with something like the ruthlessness of George Eliot, what may be called the tragedy of circumstance, the power of mere events on certain kinds of character. By mere events we mean a sequence in the evolution of which no moral obliquity, no deliberate viciousness of choice, [124] can be said to have had a share. For this is another point of merit in Mr Hardy's book, that he has kept up interest throughout it at an unusually high degree, not only without a single crime or a single villain, but with men of honest hearts and high aims for the pillars of his story, and literally without resorting, on any one's part, to a single action which, when weighed and sifted, can be condemned outright.

Ten years earlier,¹²⁵ Moule had written a letter to a Hardy anxiously concerned about his prose, in which he had warned him against attaching "much value to that minute way of looking at style"... He goes on to give a piece of very sound advice:

The grand object of all in learning to write well is to gain or to generate something to say. Be a "full

124 It may be worthy of note that the Pall Mall Gazette seems to see this point differently, noting that Elfride "betrays a tendency to commence experiments" with Stephen.

125 Letter of July 2, 1863, quoted in Deacon and Coleman, p. 89.

man'. . . . It always appears to me that a man whose mind is full of a subject, or who can before writing make his mind full of it, has only to pay that attention to method and arrangement which is obvious to any mind of vigorous tone, in order to write well.

It is possible that in drawing attention to "the tragedy [which] consists in the operation of quite ordinary events upon [a] sensitive and conscious, but perfectly simple nature" Moule was telling Hardy that he saw in him a "full man", and that Hardy was thenceforth content to draw upon that same fullness for all his best work.

CHAPTER 4

TWO FOR THE CORNHILL

i. Far from the Madding Crowd

"The gentle Spectator ... thinks that you must be George Eliot because you know the names of the stars." This sentence in a letter from Leslie Stephen to Hardy written on January 8, 1874, refers to what has come to be regarded as a kind of watershed in Hardy's reputation, and rightly so. There can be no question but that with the publication of the first instalment of Far from the Madding Crowd in the January issue of the Cornhill, and the Spectator's excited reaction on January 3, Hardy had 'arrived'. The thesis made in the previous chapter is still valid: from Hardy's own point of view as an author, the encouraging reception of A Pair of Blue Eyes must have been a matter of great importance,¹ and it is therefore worthy of more than the passing glance it customarily receives; but it is a fact that, in spite of so warm a welcome on the part of the reviewers, the book made very little impact on the public.² With Far from the Madding

1 It must have given him confidence as he began, in mid-1873, to get to work on the "pastoral tale" he had promised to Stephen, whose request for a novel for the Cornhill had arrived while Hardy was still writing A Pair of Blue Eyes for Tinsley.

2 The first edition had been of 500 copies only; Tinsley called the book "by far the weakest" of the three novels he published, but this may be just as much an assessment of its literary merits as an indication of its sales.

Crowd, it was a different story altogether: this book made Hardy's reputation.³

There can be no doubt that the Spectator's guess at the authorship of the new Cornhill serial did much to arouse interest in the work. Seven of the eighteen⁴ reviewers refer at the end of the year to the incident of ten or eleven months earlier, and it seems reasonable to suppose that their lack of unanimity in the matter (four cannot comprehend how the mistake could possibly have been made; the other three consider it a very understandable error), if it reflected a division of opinion among the reading public as a whole, suggests that there had been much drawing-room argument in January and February 1874 about the story and the Spectator's attribution. Such a conjecture finds support in the Daily News⁵ notice:

It will not be forgotten that a critic on reading the first chapter of "Far from the Madding Crowd" ... stumbled into a mare's nest, and pronounced

3 The next six novels all follow Hardy's name on the title-page with "Author of 'Far from the Madding Crowd'", except for The Trumpet-Major, which omits the reference on the title-page but puts it on the spine. The Woodlanders (1887) makes no mention of any previous work.

4 A very significant increase in attention over the first three novels, which had six, seven and eight reviews, respectively. Hardy was reviewed for the first time by the Academy, the British Quarterly Review, the Daily News, the Examiner, John Bull, the Observer, the Pictorial World, the Queen, the Westminster Review, and the World.

5 December 26, 1874.

the new work to be from the pen of George Eliot. Public attention was aroused,^[6] and when expectant readers turned to the pages in question, their real merit was imperfectly recognised, because none could find in them the transcendent merit he expected.

What the Spectator had written in fact, went far beyond the names of the stars; the columnist had seen, or so he thought, all manner of evidence that George Eliot was responsible for "this high intellectual treat". A lengthy quotation will indicate several things: the characteristics that were thought typical of George Eliot; the parts of the first five chapters that seemed especially commendable; and the details that formed the basis of the argument provoked by the mistaken attribution. The Spectator told its readers that an anonymous novel had begun in the Cornhill that was

so clever and so remarkable, that though speculation upon the authorship be indiscreet, it is irresistible. If "Far from the Madding Crowd" is not written by George Eliot, then there is a new light among novelists. In every page of these introductory chapters there are a dozen sentences which have the ring of the wit and the wisdom of the only truly great English novelist.

6 The Examiner, December 5, 1874, says that "the point was very generally discussed."

The description of Gabriel Oak is too perfect, for it will not bear curtailment* Then the beautiful girl with whom Farmer Oak falls in love is described in passages which bear internal evidence* There is a passage descriptive of the companionship of the stars, so learned and so poetical that it seems to be irrefutable evidence of the authorship.

These few hundred words constituted an extraordinary piece of luck for Hardy.⁷ It would be hard to imagine a more effective way of drawing attention to a novel in the 1870's than to attribute it to George Eliot: her pre-eminence in the world of letters is attested to by innumerable pieces of evidence and there is no doubt that the reading public had not only been awaiting a successor to Middlemarch but also, perhaps even more in many instances, hoping for a return to the scenes of Adam Bede and the other early novels. As a result, the value of the attention would have been so great that even an early retraction - especially one as gracious as that in the Spectator of February 7 - would be unlikely to diminish it very greatly:

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- * The piece includes four excerpts from the novel. The first is almost all of the middle paragraph on page 3 of the Macmillan Library Edition; the second, most of the last paragraph on page 11; the third the first two sentences on page 19; the fourth the single sentence on page 23 - "He wished she knew his impressions; but he would as soon have thought of carrying an odour in a net as of attempting to convey the intangibilities of his feeling in the coarse meshes of language."
- 7 Notwithstanding the danger inherent in it: "A work once over-praised is likely to end by being under-estimated, and thus manifest injustice is sooner or later wrought by injudicious friendship." (Daily News)

The novel in the Cornhill, to which we thought so lofty an origin as the pen of 'George Eliot' might possibly be assigned, is not the work of that illustrious writer; but it is, though the second instalment is not quite equal to the opening chapters, a remarkable production, and it goes beyond the high and sanguine hopes with which the previous works of its author, Mr Hardy, ... inspired us. This gentleman has a career before him in the higher walks of his art - a sphere of which the ordinary 'popular' novelist class have seemingly no consciousness - toward which he will be helped by a close study - not degenerating into a servile imitation - of the great novelist whose popularity is the best refutation that novel-readers have to offer of the common charge against them of general ignorance and bad taste.⁸

Detailed comparison with George Eliot was taken up again in the reviews of the three-volume edition; not only by the seven who wished to ridicule or to vindicate the Spectator column, but by six others who make the point in vacuo as it were. That thirteen of the eighteen reviewers feel called

8 The only readers Mr Hardy can "fail to please" are those "who do not read with genuine pleasure, if they cannot also read with indolent ease" for his pages "are too closely packed with sentences which all demand equal attention". The Spectator wrote of the serial again in March (when it thought that it had fallen off somewhat - it did not like the development of Bathsheba, "the descriptive touches are somewhat strained" and "we miss the full humour of the earlier chapters") but after that paid no attention until October 10. In that issue, the criticism reads in part: "Mr. Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd' resumes its earlier interest in the chapters for this month, in which the laborious artificiality which has injured it too much lately is discarded, and several artistic touches may be recognised".

upon to discuss George Eliot's work in the course of reviewing Hardy's is a remarkable thing, and one that should form the basis of any assessment of contemporary reaction to Far from the Madding Crowd. Let one of those who were scornful of the Spectator's attribution provide the opening argument:

... we cannot for our lives understand how any person of ordinary penetration, much more a skilled critic, could ever have supposed it to be written by George Eliot. The author of Romola and The Mill on the Floss is a great artist, too much of an artist sometimes. The author of Far from the Madding Crowd is a dauber by comparison; but if a dauber at all, a dauber who throws on the colours, and arranges the figures and manages the composition with a vast deal of reckless skill. His ingenuity is greater ... but whilst she knows more of human nature than all of us put together, he knows just about as much of it as the simplest of us, and no more. His observations are admirably set forth sometimes, and are always appropriate; but they are only our own observations put epigrammatically - not new ones, by any means, as George Eliot's are.⁹

The Examiner takes an altogether different view of the mistake:

... if those chapters stood by themselves as a fragment of unknown authorship, no conjecture would be more plausible: they deal with the kind of life that George Eliot has more than once chosen to describe, to which, in fact, she has almost acquired a prescriptive right, and the opening description of Farmer Oak is a portrait very much in her manner. If the critic

9 Observer, January 3, 1875.

cared to go into minute corroborations of such distinguished parentage, he would find them in the incidents of Bathsheba's unpacking the mirror, and taking a survey of her beauty ... and her higgling over twopence with the toll-keeper: these little incidents have a delicious spice of malicious truth to nature which one often finds in George Eliot's pictures.¹⁰

The other five do not concern themselves with arguing their point in similar detail, although the Westminster¹¹ ("Nor was [the Spectator's] critical sagacity so very far wide of the mark") makes a rather pedestrian comparison: Derbyshire for Dorset; harvest home for sheep-shearing supper; the treatment of Donnithorne ("George Eliot's failure") and that of Troy; the two reprieve scenes. The Graphic¹² says straightforwardly, "It was natural enough that the story ... should have been attributed to George Eliot, and we can give the author no higher praise than by saying that the mistake did no dishonour to the greatest of our novelists"; while the Athenaeum¹³ is equally short on the other side:

10 Having said this, the Examiner goes on to say that there are, in the work as a whole, indications of great dissimilarity: "Mr. Hardy is not such a master of language ... his style has not the same freshness" and he is "much less of a preacher ... his interests are more exclusively dramatic".

11 January 1875.

12 December 12, 1874

13 December 5, 1874.

How his present story could ever have been supposed to be written by George Eliot we cannot conceive, though her influence has been plainly visible in some of his former books ...

although it goes on to say that some of the scenes "are worthy, in their extravagance, of Mr. Reade, and of him only" and that "the stronger parts are Mr. Hardy's own". The British Quarterly Review¹⁴ is still more brusque: "A critic ... must be very blind who could mistake the highly finished work of George Eliot for the much rougher work of Mr. Hardy ..."

The periodicals that introduce a comparison to George Eliot without reference to the Spectator tend to come at the point from one of two different approaches: the novelist's style, or the rustic setting. The Saturday Review,¹⁵ in the middle of a highly critical article, deals with the way in which he "idealizes" the "English Boeotian", making them "Athenians in acuteness, Germans in capacity for philosophic speculation, and Parisians in polish".¹⁶ It goes on to acknowledge, however, not only that he has "good material to work on" but that others have set him a similar example:

14 January 1875.

15 January 9, 1875.

16 This is a very elaborate statement of an argument put forward in many other reviews, cf. pp. 157-160 below.

"George Eliot in her early books ... has drawn specimens of the illiterate class who talk theology like the Bench of Bishops - except that they are all Dissenters - and politics like the young Radicals who sit, or used to sit, below the gangway." In her case, however, there is a difference, for "the reader felt that the author had seen these rustic theologians and politicians and heard their conversations"; her rustics, in any case, do not "rise to anything like the flights of abstract reasoning with which Mr. Hardy credits his cider-drinking boors".¹⁷ The other reference to George Eliot's rustics in the Academy,¹⁸ takes a slightly different line, but it is still not to Hardy's advantage: after referring to the way in which, like George Eliot, he "contemplates his shepherds ... with the eye of a philosopher who understands all about them, though he is not of them" and expresses "their dim efforts at rendering what they think and feel in language like that of Mr. Herbert Spencer", the reviewer goes on:

17 One wonders what Hardy made of this and other similar blunt criticisms. He had "seen the rustic theologians ... and heard their conversations" at, to say the least, as close quarters as George Eliot ever had. Had he not deliberately gone back to the house in which he had been born to write this very novel? It must have been puzzling or hurtful or both.

18 January 2, 1875.

The author is telling clever people about unlettered people, and he adopts a sort of patronizing voice, in which there are echoes, now of George Eliot, and now of George Meredith. Thus there are passages where the manner and the matter jar, and are out of keeping.

It is the alleged tendency to 'over-write' the rustics' speeches that distresses these and other critics: it is another tendency to over-write in general that distresses the others who see a similarity with George Eliot. The Times¹⁹ puts its criticism in the middle of a highly complimentary paragraph:

Praise is so pleasant and appropriate in noticing this book that it is necessary not to lose sight of ... the observation that will force itself on the most friendly critic. It is that almost from the first page to the last the reader is never quite free from a suspicion - which at times swells into certainty - that Mr. Hardy is, consciously or unconsciously, imitating George Eliot's phraseology and style of dealing with the rough material of words.

The reviewer suggests that this is unfortunate partly because "no peculiarity of style survives transplanting" and partly because Hardy ought to avoid provoking comparisons. The Pictorial World²⁰ makes the comparisons, remarking like the Times that "either unconsciously or with intent" Hardy is a

19 January 25, 1875.

20 February 6, 1875. This review contains the charming sentence, "We can honestly recommend it to those ... who are thankful this dreary weather for a work of fiction over which it will be impossible to fall asleep".

close imitator of George Eliot, and draws the conclusion that

when he tries to philosophise after the half-cynical, and always solemn manner of his teacher, he fails lamentably. Long words and involved sentences are a poor substitute for the sharp, epigrammatic force with which Miss Evans exposes a fallacy, or gives new point to a familiar truism.

The World²¹ makes the same point, but not so much with regard to the aphorisms as to "those peculiarities which he has palpably foisted in upon his work [under the cloak of the imitation of George Eliot] because he is a slave to the conviction that the slang of the laboratory and the jargon of the mechanics' institute are genuine notes of literary merit." The review goes on, after an anecdote concerning a scientific metaphor overheard by the reviewer when he was "in his place in the House of Commons one evening", to a lengthy paragraph in which he gives "a few characteristic instances",²² and launches an attack upon the use of "this stilted pseudo-scientific cant":

Can he not realise the fact that the peculiarities which he so faithfully reproduces are the idiosyncratic faults of his great original? We are not among

21 December 2, 1874.

22 "Potentialities of exploit", "the spherical completeness", "mechanism only transmutes labour, being powerless to abstract it, and the original quantum of exertion was not cleared away", etc. etc.

those who consider that Middlemarch is George Eliot's greatest work; we believe that Adam Bede is an incomparably greater and more successful effort. If Mr Hardy chooses to read Mrs Lewes's earlier productions, he will find none of that straining after curiously philosophic erudition in the matter of phrases which appears in her later works. That is to be explained by the circumstance that Miss Evans was not then Mrs Lewes. The versatile translator of Used Up and the nimble author of a History of Philosophy has made his mark upon an intellect infinitely more powerful than his own.

Hardy seems to have disturbed a hornets' nest,²³ and even sweet phrases from the Graphic would be unlikely to make up for such an attack: the Graphic had said that "no other hand, save George Eliot's, could have given us such a group" as Fray, Coggan, Moon and Poorgrass. It had also paid another compliment with which other reviews were to

23 Even the very brief review in John Bull (December 12, 1874) spares a sentence to warn Hardy against "what has been felicitously called 'the pretentious coinage of soi-disant science'", and the Queen (January 9, 1875) departs from its complimentary tone for only two causes, one of which is the tendency to "deface his pages with an unintelligible jargon of learned phrase, not always accurately used. The trick ... of clothing simple ideas in very hard words, looked out from dictionaries of scientific terms, savours more of the conceit of juvenile donishness than the modesty of mature learning ... This kind of rigmarole ... defaces almost every chapter of the book, when the author - for the sake of effect, we presume - leaves the beaten track of homely English." The Observer also writes at great length about the way in which Hardy helps to demonstrate George Eliot's weakness in this direction by imitating and exaggerating it.

disagree strongly: "Mr Hardy's style here ... is all but entirely free from the affectations which were apt occasionally to disfigure it". The Saturday's verdict is exactly the opposite:

... Mr Hardy disfigures his pages by bad writing, by clumsy and inelegant metaphors, and by mannerisms and affectation. ...* Eccentricities of style are not characteristic of genius, nor of original thinking.... If he has the self-control to throw aside his tendency to strain after metaphorical effects, and if he will cultivate simplicity of diction as effectually as he selects simple and natural subjects to write about, he may mellow into a considerable novelist.

The Saturday critic then turns to consider the "idealizing" of the "English Boeotian"; in doing so, he is following the example of several of his colleagues. The Athenaeum, which also once more objects to "monstrous periphrases", complains that although Hardy is "evidently a shrewd observer" of rustic life, yet he will persist in putting into the mouths of his rustics "expressions which we simply cannot believe possible from the illiterate clods whom he describes".²⁴ This aspect of contemporary criticism has already been described and illustrated in other chapters, and it may appear that to consider it again is to be merely repetitious. The fact is, however,

* There follow several examples: "lymph on the dart of Eros ...", "redeemed-demonian [rather] than blemished-angelic", etc. etc.

24 The Academy refers to their language as "odd scraps of a kind of rural euphuism, misapplications of scripture and fragments of modern mechanical wit" and adds, "Do labourers really converse like this?"

that it was a major factor in the criticism of the day, one to which writers then were prepared to devote hundreds of words, even though it is one that nowadays is either not noticed, or, if noticed, is thought not to be worth taking seriously. There is, nevertheless, an interesting contrast between, for example, Wing's view of the rustics

... their choral commentary is sung in a darker, more threatening climate, [and] they themselves have undertones of the inimical. They reflect the universal futility and helplessness ...²⁵

or Evelyn Hardy's verdict that the scene in the malthouse "shows Hardy at his best in delineating a rustic scene and characters",²⁶ and the Saturday's cider-drinking boors or the Athenaeum's illiterate clods, or, most striking of all perhaps, the Spectator's²⁷ very detailed analysis of what it considers to be the shortcomings of the rustic scenes. The paragraph in which this analysis is made takes up almost half of a very long review, and it seems clear that the reviewer is genuinely concerned over the issue. The Saturday critic is also troubled by it:

Doubting the authenticity of the conversations, we are led to question the truthfulness of such scenes as these.. [Troy's sword-play before Bathsheba].

25 Op. cit., p. 48

26 Op. cit., p. 138.

27 December 19, 1874.

Are they a faithful rendering of real events taking place from time to time in the South-Western counties, or are they not imaginary creations with possibly some small groundwork of reality?

The Spectator had begun its review with a flattering reference to the book's "fresh" and "striking" qualities: the life of rural Dorset is a new field for the novelist and it has been "mastered" by the author:

The details of the farming and the sheep-keeping, of the labouring, the feasting, and the mourning, are painted with all the vividness of a powerful imagination, painting from the stores of a sharply-outlined memory. ... A book like this is, in relation to many of the scenes it describes, the nearest equivalent to actual experience which a great many of us are ever likely to boast of. But the very certainty we feel that this is the case - that we have no adequate means of checking a good deal of the very fresh ... detail which we find ... puts us upon asking all the more anxiously whether all the vivacious description we have here is quite trustworthy ...

From this point the writer elaborates his concern, his doubts about Hardy's authenticity: "a more incredible picture ... can hardly be conceived", he says of the rustics - such a "treasure house ... would cancel at once the reputation rural England has got for a heavy, bovine, character". He questions expressions used by Liddy Smallbury, Jan Coggan, and Maryann Money - "remark[s] ... of quite another moral latitude and longitude" - as well as Coggan's possessing a repeater-watch. He compares them with Mrs. Gamp but decides that her shrewdness is no more than one would expect whereas these "poor men" are

quizzical critics, inaccurate divines, keen-eyed men of the world, who talk a semi-Biblical dialect full of veins of humour which have passed into it from a different sphere.

This critic and others pursue the matter further than can be explored here; in any event the point should not be pressed too far for there is no likelihood that a modern reader would feel in any way obliged to reconsider his own estimate of the authenticity of the world of Hardy's novels because of the strictures of a few London critics who are almost certain to have known infinitely less about rural Dorset than Hardy himself. It would be quite wrong, however, not to give the issue some prominence, for it received it in its own day, and it must have caused Hardy a certain amount of distress, or at least uneasiness.

A consideration of the rest of what was said by the reviewers reveals that although the reception was everywhere friendly, it was not by any means the kind of ecstatic chorus that we associate nowadays with the launching of a bestseller. Some few critics were ready to declare that a new star was in the literary heavens, but the great majority were not prepared to commit themselves so far. Indeed, when it comes to a sensitive appraisal of the book's greatness the student must turn to modern essays, although few even of these seem to do the work full justice.

One point at which Hardy's contemporaries would appear to have underestimated his achievement is in their appreciation of Bathsheba: it is useless to seek a wide corroboration of Douglas Brown ("as a changing, developing, person she is among the outstanding successes of his novel") or Guerard ("a courageous figure in her own right ... changed by responsibility and disaster") or Evelyn Hardy ("courageous, capable, Bathsheba"). Most of the contemporary reviewers saw her as a much simpler character.

The Westminster is struck mainly by her unattractiveness:

Upon her he has lavished all his skill. ... neither beauty nor vanity are the key to Bathsheba's character. Whatever Mr. Hardy may wish us to think of his heroine, the one leading trait of her character ... is at the bottom - selfishness ... She is hard and mercenary ... Bathsheba is the character of the book, and Mr. Hardy may be proud of having drawn such a character. But she is a character not to be admired ...

but others are unwilling to go even so far as to say that she is "the character of the book". The Morning Post²⁸ prefers the "very good sketches" of Boldwood and Troy to that of Bathsheba, and the Academy is inclined towards the same conclusion, for while it finds "some difficulty in being much moved by Bathsheba's character and mischances", it suggests that

28 December 28, 1874.

Nothing could be more true or more careful than the study of Troy, the handsome sergeant, with his half education, his selfishness, his love, which he only finds out to be something like true love under the influence of remorse.

The World calls her "genuinely original" but goes on to say that it is only "the old tale of the taming of the shrew, and blood is shed and bitter tears wasted before Bathsheba's proudly-coquettish nature is tamed." John Bull also finds her an "original creation" but brackets her in that category with Joseph Poorgrass. The Pictorial World warns its readers that Bathsheba

is unlike the majority of women in being a strange combination of unnatural strength and childish weakness; she behaves alternately like the silliest of schoolgirls and the most heroic of Spartan matrons.

The Graphic believes that she is a "genuine masterpiece", but so is Farmer Boldwood; the Examiner is prepared to be even more kind and to say that she is a "marvellously well-drawn [if] difficult heroine ... [with an] inner nature curiously compounded of shrewdness, strong-minded frankness and courage, and decorous, imperious, wayward womanliness",²⁹ but when it attempts to take its analysis further everything goes rather limp:

29 Not exactly a Victorian ideal of womanhood.

The novel may be viewed as a history of a struggle between impulsive womanliness and worldly good sense, all Bathsheba's troubles coming from her beauty and consequent waywardness and vanity, and the rectification coming from the homelier side.

The Echo³⁰ may find Bathsheba ("the author's chef d'oeuvre") "winning" as well as "wayward", but her winning ways are not enough to redeem her in the eyes of the

Observer:

The first interview between Troy and Bathsheba represents the latter in so odious a light, if women in whatever rank of society are supposed to retain any trace of modesty and reserve, that we confess we do not care one straw about her afterwards, and are only sorry that Gabriel Oak was not sufficiently manly to refuse to have anything more to say to such an incorrigible hussy.

The Daily News is still less impressed, finding her bearing "a strong family resemblance to Mr Charles Reade's athletic heroines and brawny benchwomen", the Spectator considers that she is a "half-conceived and half drawn figure" who "falls back into an uninterestingness of which we cannot exactly define the reason", while the Athenaeum does not

30 . November 28, 1874, which goes on to make an unexpected comparison: "Bathsheba ... is independent, rich for her station, handsome, quick-witted, and conscious that in every way she is no mean prize. In such a case, perhaps, it may be true to nature that the tenderness and justice of the civilized woman should be neutralised in some degree by the primitive instinct which makes the savage maiden regard the death-grapple in which she sees her dusky suitors locked as the fitting tribute to her worth."

refer to her at all and the Academy observes, "we feel inclined to say to her, as Mr. Buckstone does to Galatea in the play, 'You're sure it's innocence?'" The Spectator goes no further than to describe her as

a rustic beauty fond of admiration, loving her independence, without much heart but with a brave spirit, a sharp hand at a bargain, an arrant flirt overflowing with vanity but modest withal.

Only the Times and, appropriately, the Queen, are prepared to give her her due, the latter regarding her as "a young woman sowing her wild oats and reaping a crop of disasters and humiliation ... [yet who is] of no common order, [having] courage and intellect." The Times devotes a large proportion of its column to her:

Bathsheba Everdene stands alone as heroine, and her character is well worthy of its solitude. Every stroke tells in the portrait, nor is there one too many or too few. She is an uncommon type, as a heroine should be, and yet a natural adorable woman down to her fingertips ... We feel a pity all the more intense for Bathsheba's trouble because we recognize a certain nobility of nature and largeness of soul underlying her rustic coquetry and arrogance, which would have led to a happier ending for every one if her unworthy husband could only have discerned her true nature and trusted to it.

This comes much the closest to the Guerard view that Bathsheba, "at first another Fancy Day, a vain and highly amusing tease, becomes almost a symbolic figure of resourcefulness and endurance",³¹ but there must be set against it the

31 Op. cit., p. 137.

view of the paper for the man-in-the-street, the Morning Post: "For our own part we like her better as 'Mis'ess's niece" than when in command at Weatherbury; she seems to grow unnatural ... as we proceed with the story."

There is, however, an almost general agreement that the characters are good:

every one of these figures is perfect, solid, and substantial, with a distinct individuality of his own, so that it would be almost possible to assign every speech to its proper speaker without looking at the name.³²

Every character comes in for praise from one reviewer or another³³ - Joseph,³⁴ and the rustics generally,³⁵ Fanny Robin,

32 Guardian, February 24, 1875. This is an expression of the majority opinion. The Observer and the Academy speak for the other side: "His great want, it seems to us, is want of depth, more especially in portraying character. No doubt, if he had dug deeper into his characters in this story, the reader would have seen ... the fundamental absurdity and impossibility of much of the story", and "we cannot say that we are greatly fascinated with the persons or much concerned in their fortunes".

33 And this in spite of the fact that "there is not a lady or a gentleman in the book in the ordinary sense of the word. They are all working people, and ever so much more interesting than the idle lords and ladies, with the story of whose loves and sorrows Mr. Mudie's shelves are always crammed." (Times)

34 "An admirable creation" (World), "inimitable" (Times), - "that pre-eminent bore" (Academy).

35 Whom the Guardian describes as being of "a very different strain from Corydon and Phillis ... down-right labourers, heavy, and slow and somewhat gross, but with touches of humour ..." It regards the malthouse conversation, from which it quotes, as "only one gem out of a full store-case".

Liddy Smallbury. It is the working-out of the fortunes of the three suitors, however, that attracts the most attention: "the interest of the story", says the Saturday, "consists in contrasting the three lovers in their respective attitudes towards the heroine",³⁶ and the British Quarterly devotes a whole paragraph to showing how "Bathsheba's three lovers are admirably discriminated" and how "each ... is subtly accounted for in the connections of circumstance and character". Gabriel Oak is, on the whole, not so much admired as the others, although the reviewer is moved to observe that "very few living writers could ... delineate with so true and restrained a power the splendid character of Gabriel". The Queen refers to his "moving unobtrusively in the background ... heedless of rebuffs like a faithful dog, good fellow as he is", but the Saturday while retaining the same simile gives it a slightly different twist, perhaps because the reviewer is a man rather than a woman: "He serves her like a faithful dog, for many weary years, suffering patiently ... until ... he finally reaps the reward of his dumb devotion". Even Hardy's skill in drawing characters has deserted him in this instance, according to the Guardian, for "Oak's love is

36 The Athenaeum makes the same point in almost exactly the same words.

rather too high-toned for the general pitch of the work, and Oak himself rises somewhat too much above the class he lives among". The Observer thinks that the portrait is not true to life for an entirely different reason: "We think that a man like Gabriel Oak would never have consented to accept Sergeant Troy's and Farmer Boldwood's leavings."

Troy and Boldwood receive a good deal more attention from the reviewers, and occasionally provoke the writing of perceptive criticism:

Sergeant Troy and Farmer Boldwood are both of them conceived and executed with very great power ... The stiffness, the awkward reserve, the seeming solidity, the latent heat and the smouldering passion which when once kindled eats up Farmer Boldwood's whole nature, are painted with the pen of a considerable artist, nor does the vigour of the picture ever flag for a moment; the tragical denouement is in the strictest keeping with the first description of Boldwood's mode of receiving Bathsheba's careless valentine.³⁷

a man of a strong passionate nature, the recesses of which Mr. Hardy is careful to probe, and the peculiar expression of which he describes with care ...³⁸

a dashing young sergeant [who is] ... not an utterly bad man, but one of those weak mortals who, ever yielding to the impulse of the moment, do the acts of bad men ... for manly feeling he substitutes a mawkish sentimentality ... [He] startles, bullies, frightens the hitherto insensible Bathsheba into loving and marrying him.³⁹

37 Spectator.

38 Morning Post.

39 Queen.

Troy is consistent throughout; a vain, selfish, heartless man, as utterly unworthy of his wife's devotion as of poor Fanny Robin's trust. He never rises to the occasion, and cannot understand the subtleties of a woman's nature. He never feels remorse until it is too late, and then he upbraids Fate for the consequences of his own selfish short-sightedness.⁴⁰

This widespread interest in, and sympathy with, Boldwood and Troy, each passionate in his own way, and the comparatively strong dissatisfaction with Oak, does not square with Wing's view that Oak and Boldwood, because they are honest and respectable men "would probably make ... much more easy and restful ... Victorian husbands"⁴¹ although the Examiner does provide a strongly Victorian description of the part Oak plays in the book:

Behind all the tumult and agony, and walking through the midst of it unscathed, we see Gabriel Oak steadily pursuing his honest, faithful course, by sheer fidelity and capability commending himself to the more sober instincts of Bathsheba, and building a harbour of tranquil attachment in which she finds shelter when she escapes from the storm into which her vanity and waywardness had tempted her.

40. Times.

41. Op. cit., p. 51. Wing's argument that there is something to be said for discarding the view that "used to be critically fashionable" that Bathsheba is wronged, that Oak is the hero, that Boldwood is deadly dull and that Troy is incorrigible, finds support all along the line from Hardy's earliest readers.

The current view that Hardy revealed for the first time in Far from the Madding Crowd his full powers as the great artist of the Wessex⁴² countryside is widely shared by his contemporaries, particularly by the reviewers in the serious weeklies:

the rural surroundings, the effects of weather and atmosphere, the labours of beasts and men ... may be pronounced nearly perfect, and worthy of all praise ...⁴³

Very few living writers could so minutely describe the manifold phenomena of nature, or work up with such genuine power scenes of sublimity and passion, - such as the night storm at the harvest revel, and the Christmas dance at Boldwood's house ...⁴⁴

we know of no other living author who could have so described the burning rick-yard, or the approaching thunder-storm⁴⁵

It would be a very defective criticism of this striking tale which said nothing of the beauty of its descriptive sketches. Many of them are pictures of the most delicate and vivid beauty, - watercolours in words, and very fine ones too.⁴⁶

42 No one comments on Hardy's first use of Wessex to denote the setting.

43 Academy.

44 British Quarterly.

45 Athenæum.

46 Spectator.

The point made by Lord David Cecil that Hardy's novels are "visual novels" ("It is in his ability to make us 'see' that his greatest strength lies. And he relies mainly on it for his effects"⁴⁷) finds earlier expression in a sentence from the Pictorial World in which Hardy's ability is warmly praised:

The thunder-storm ... is also described in a masterly manner; we actually seem to see the storm coming, and long to help the sturdy shepherd at his work.⁴⁸

Hardy's ability to describe rural phenomena accurately and vividly, however, leads once more to the charge of "coarseness". The Morning Post is concerned that he is sometimes "too realistic" and that "in describing the loves of these people of low degree he is not now and then a little bit coarse", and the Athenaeum reminds Hardy that it remarked on his failing in this respect when reviewing Desperate Remedies, and tells him that this "coarseness ... still disfigures his work and repels the reader". The Morning Post remark gives the modern reader a better insight than the generalities of earlier critics into what precisely is being deprecated, but the British Quarterly Review is, helpfully, more explicit still:

47 Op. cit., p. 65.

48 For a detailed analysis of how Hardy achieves this effect in this instance, cf. Brown, op. cit., pp. 51-55.

He takes occasion to introduce one or two old stories - one about the husband who induced his wife to take off her wedding ring, for instance - which might well have been omitted. Coarseness is not a necessary attribute either of strength or reality.

It seems likely that this episode in Far from the Madding Crowd is the one that the reviewer in the Queen had in mind when she wrote that Hardy displayed a habit "of speaking in a tone approaching levity of things which ought only to be named with awe and reverence". It was also the episode that the Times singled out for commendation, thus provoking an exchange between Hardy and Leslie Stephen about whether Stephen had been justified in thinking that he ought to have asked Hardy to remove it before it appeared in the Cornhill.⁴⁹ These two earlier reviews in other influential periodicals (which, it appears, Hardy did not see) would have confirmed Stephen in his view that he had been, "as editor, not as man", correct in his instincts in the matter.

The malthouse scene is not the only one that the reviewers take objection to. The Daily News condemns "Fanny Robin's midnight promenade with a dog for a walking stick" as "almost

49 The incident is recounted in the Life, p. 99. "Three respectable ladies and subscribers ... had written to upbraid [Stephen] for an improper passage in a page of the story."

ludicrous in its impossibility" although it grudgingly admits that it "commands respect". The episode of Troy's swordplay with Bathsheba (free, of course, from any Freudian interpretation) is displeasing to the Pictorial World, which finds it "absurd" and calls it nonsense, and to the Westminster, which thinks it "a piece of mad extravagance, fit only for the boards of some transpontine theatre".

For every critic who deplores a "scene" there are two to praise it: the Guardian thinks the malthouse scene "a gem", and the Times gives it special prominence. A similar thing is true of the scenes involving Fanny and that of the swordplay. The Saturday brings its review to its climax by describing and commending Hardy's treatment of Fanny's appearance at the barracks and her walk to the workhouse:

The author has put out his whole force in the description of these last two incidents ... [and the second] stands comparison not unfairly even with that most powerful narrative of the shipwreck of a girl's life.

and the Pictorial World finds the earlier scene "hard to equal" and the later one "powerful and pathetic".

The World speaks up for what the Saturday calls "that most unconventional picture in 'the hollow in the glen'", and carries the reader along to another part of the novel that found much praise:

There are two scenes in Far from the Madding Crowd which would stamp the author of the novel as a man of rare power and dramatic skill. The first is that in which Sergeant Troy performs his sword exercise before Bathsheba; the second is that in which the central feature is Fanny Robin's coffin. We couple the two because in the former Mr. Hardy inspires the presentment which he fulfils in the latter.

Each of these episodes finds more eloquent praise elsewhere, the Spectator praising the former as a scene "of quite exceptional power and skill" and the Academy the latter as

a very powerful and strange scene ... it is a situation worthy of the drama of Webster^[50] or of Ford, and wild as it is, is led up to in a perfectly natural way.

The Times and the Queen also admire this episode, in one case for its tact, in the other for its power.

The reference to the "perfectly natural way" in which this scene is broached leads to the last major point in this examination of the reviews of Far from the Madding Crowd. In this instance, a case could be made for judging some of Hardy's contemporary critics as more acute than their modern counterparts: the fact is that no recent writer has suggested how extraordinarily skilful Hardy is in arranging his plot, whereas more than one of these magazine writers saw his strength and

50: Another pre-echo of an important point made by Lord David Cecil (op. cit., pp. 64-65), where he argues that Hardy has the power of the dramatic poet, and invokes comparisons between some of Hardy's most powerful scenes and some of Shakespeare's or Webster's.

praised it warmly. It is true that there is no unanimity, for the Westminster, for example, fears that in this work "sensationalism is all in all" and argues that virtually every movement of the plot is dependent on a sensational act; the Academy does not like the "commonplace tragedy of the dénouement", nor does the Pictorial World, which believes that

Mr Hardy, in winding up his story in a sensational manner, simply panders to the depraved state of the present day, and by doing so has spoiled his work

but they are in a minority, and their case is weakly put compared with John Bull's fine compliment

those who can appreciate a really good novel will delight in "Far from the Madding Crowd", not so much for the evidence it affords of the author's insight into character or his happy method of expressing his meaning, but for the consummate art in the arrangement of his plot

and with the lively analyses of the Examiner and the Saturday.

The first of these included in its review a lengthy appraisal of Hardy's skill which still merits consideration and may well have been of value to Hardy himself: it is couched in straightforward and commonplace prose and its verdicts may seem superficial, but in suggesting to his readers the narrowness of Hardy's scope and the limits of his ambition, the reviewer helps to concentrate attention on Hardy's art and power:

Now the drama in Mr. Hardy's novels is in no sense a warfare of opinions and ideas: it is a warfare of persons, persons moved by the primeval motives of love and jealousy. 'Far from the Madding Crowd' is concerned with no deeper mysteries than women's hearts, and how they are lost and won ...[51]

if we ... approach Mr. Hardy's novel simply as a drama, willing to believe that it need not be frivolous because it has no great lesson to teach, it is impossible not to recognize the novelist's power.

Mr. Hardy's art does not lie in the multiplication and complication of incidents, but in the searching and complete way in which he traces the effect of each incident upon the thoughts and feelings of the person-ages.

How Bathsheba ... could be brought to rest her affections on [Gabriel] is the difficult problem Mr. Hardy has applied himself to solve ... There is not much beyond the interest of paradox in the problem itself, but the path to it lies through regions of tragic perturbation - Bathsheba's mind is tamed and cleared by means of pity and terror.

The strength of the deadly conflict shines out all the more luridly from the quiet of the rural background.

51 One is reminded of Douglas Brown's assertion that "it is again a ballad-tale he has to tell" (Op. cit., p. 49). Another shared observation is Brown's based on Hardy's sentence, "In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times still new; his present is futurity", and the Academy's based on the same quotation: "... when the sheep are shorn in the ancient barn at Weatherbury, the scene is one that Shakespeare or that Chaucer might have watched ... No condition of society could supply the writer who knows it well with a more promising ground for his story. The old and the new must meet here and there, with curious surprises ..."

The Saturday is even more helpful for it shows, at greater length than can be quoted here, how great are Hardy's abilities as a story-teller by carefully leading the reader through the details of a crucial incident. By doing so, it invites its readers to open their eyes to the art that conceals art and to avoid the easy underestimation that a sophisticated audience can so readily make of an apparently simple work of art:

Each scene is a study in itself, and, within its own limits, effective. And they all fit into the story like pieces into an elaborate puzzle, making, when they are so fitted in, an effective whole. Mr. Hardy's art consists principally in the way in which he pieces his scenes one with the other ... how is ... crisis to be brought about in a natural and ordinary way ...* Thus Bathsheba learned the secret of poor Fanny's death, and saw revealed to her Troy's selfish perfidy to Fanny, and felt the weight of his cruelty to her. And this, the most dramatic incident in the book, is brought about by what? By Joseph Poorgrass's innocently and naturally going into the "Buck's Head" to warm himself at the kitchen fire. In this careful fitting in of the pieces of his puzzle, and in the use of trifling circumstances either to work up to the dénouement or to prepare the mind for the incidents which are to follow, Mr. Hardy shows his skill. The book is prodigal of incidents apparently irreconcilable with each other. But by delicate contrivances of the kind indicated they are made to cohere, and to form a connected and not altogether incredible story.

* Here follows an incident-by-incident account of the mismanagement of the bringing back of Fanny's body from the workhouse to Weatherbury.

A reading of the eighteen reviews that greeted the appearance of Far from the Madding Crowd reveals a unanimity that is unique in Hardy's career, and rare for any novel of the day. There are faults to be found, bones to be picked and hairs to be split, but there is not one review that does not find much to praise, and there is not one reviewer who cannot turn a gracious compliment. Because this reception marked a turning-point in Hardy's reputation and helped to make his position as a novelist secure, it has seemed appropriate in this instance to include in this study the most favourable observation from each review. Fifteen of these will be found in Appendix III, but the three most striking of all are given here:

[He] has now conclusively established his right to rank as a master of prose fiction ... "Far from the Madding Crowd" is the work, not only of a clever and cultivated writer and skilful literary artist, but distinctly and emphatically a man of genius, and of genius of a very rare and high order.⁵²

One novel ... has at all events marked the past year. "Far from the Madding Crowd" stands to all contemporary novels precisely as "Adam Bede" did to all other novels sixteen years ago.⁵³

This is, in many characteristics of it, a novel of great cleverness and power. Its conception is original, the stratum of social life in which it is wrought is fresh, and the development of the somewhat complex conditions and passions, is sustained with

52 Graphic.

53 Westminster.

masterly skill, minute knowledge, and is clothed in descriptions of great force and beauty ... As a whole ... the story is the cleverest and strongest since "Middlemarch".⁵⁴

By a stroke of irony worthy of the man himself, it appears virtually certain that Hardy, the author who listened too much to the critics, did not know about any of the three who praised him most.⁵⁵

* * * * *

ii. The Hand of Ethelberta

The Examiner ended its review of Far from the Madding Crowd with the observation that "Mr. Hardy's future work will be expected with an interest that is accorded to a very few of our writers." This was, of course, inevitable, but it was also unfortunate, especially in view of the alacrity with which Stephen asked for another serial for the Cornhill (the next item in "Mr. Hardy's future work" had already been commissioned when the Examiner notice appeared) and the speed at which Hardy had to write in order to have the first instalment ready for submission to the proprietors of the magazine

54 British Quarterly.

55 This assertion is based on three things: these reviews are not in the scrapbook; they are not referred to in the Life; and the fact that between November 1874 and February 1875 Hardy and his wife were greatly preoccupied with domestic and literary demands (Life, pp. 101-102).

in March 1875. The fact that Smith, Elder were disappointed by it did not prevent their publishing the new story, and from July 1875 to May 1876 it appeared in the Cornhill accompanied by du Maurier illustrations. It was published as a book in two volumes on April 3, 1876.

The first reviews appeared ten days later, one by Butler⁵⁶ in the Athenaeum, and another by George Saintsbury⁵⁷ in the Academy; the former put Hardy first in the review of New Fiction, before seven others, the latter put him first of five. Both reviewers seem somewhat cautious, as though they are unwilling to commit themselves to anything approaching enthusiasm on the one hand or castigation on the other. Saintsbury admits that so far as style is concerned "the book may be said to be an improvement", for there is "much less deliberate topsyturvification of thought and language" than in Far from the Madding Crowd, far less of that "queerness" that made criticism of the earlier books "lost labour". There is, though, more to a novel than style and

56 Butler wrote all the Athenaeum reviews of Hardy's first eight novels except for that of A Pair of Blue Eyes.

57 At that time 31 years of age and Headmaster of the Elgin Educational Institute.

whether Mr. Hardy, having committed himself to the task of telling a plain story in moderately sober language, has, as they say in Scotland, "overtaken" that task, is another question.

On the whole the review suggests that he has not managed to do so. The "original conception" of Ethelberta is "happy and promising", and many of the scenes that make up the story of her career are "for the most part striking and well-managed ... exceedingly clever"; but this does not, in itself, make a novel. These "tableaux" are "very difficult to piece together" and have "a sort of shadowy and dissolving-view effect". Not only that, but "we can't get any idea of Ethelberta" and, although this may be because the book "suffers from the scrappiness which is a frequent drawback to novels written for periodicals", this mars the total effect, notwithstanding a "good deal of power" that the book may claim and in spite of the fact that "Ethelberta's inconsistencies and vagaries are admirably drawn, and [that] Picotee is both charming and possible", the results of "observation and imagination ... in plenty".

This same power of observation is discerned by the Athenaeum: the "modern-romantic" school to which Hardy seems to have committed himself, "after a preliminary trial of several kinds", may be "distinctly inferior ... to that which produces its effects solely with materials of everyday life",

but in the hands of a master, who is capable of seeing how people might probably act and speak in improbable circumstances, it is by no means unsatisfactory.

The flaw in Hardy's powers of observation is again his failure to "appreciate the exceeding scantiness of ideas in the brain, and words in the mouth, of a modern rustic", but in other "departures from probability" he is remarkably sure-handed, showing how apparently unusual acts are completely consistent with his characters' personalities:

... such a scene as Ethelberta's reading of Milton by the poet's tomb in Cripplegate Church, ... (like Troy's display of sword-exercise ...) though unlikely in itself, is in keeping ... Given Ethelberta, it is very like what she would do.⁵⁸

Butler devotes a very large part of his limited space to his strictures about the unnaturalness of the rustics and artisans, and about the signs of haste,⁵⁹ and this together with

58 This has some similarity to Lord David Cecil's point that in some scenes "his creative imagination was on fire, and immediately, instinctively, it embodied itself in these episodes. He just saw that the next thing that happened was that Troy showed Bathsheba the sword-drill ..." (Op. cit., p. 64). Butler's appreciation of what is going on is much less sophisticated than Lord David's, but it shows that some of the "rightness" that Hardy felt was communicated to a reader who had no thought of symbolism, and scarcely any grasp of "the deeper implications of these scenes" - any more than Hardy himself, perhaps.

59 "His sentences are often clumsy, now and then even absolutely ungrammatical."

his lengthy résumé of the plot leaves him little room to elaborate on the things he finds good in the story: "his ladies and gentlemen talk naturally enough", "the relations between Ethelberta and the brothers and sisters ... are admirably imagined and conceived".⁶⁰ Only at one other place does the review draw attention to Hardy's skill: this is at the point where the reviewer deals with the "reticence which cannot be sufficiently recommended" with which Hardy refrains from direct accounts of Ethelberta's beauty but leaves the reader "to gather from the remarks of other personages" how attractive she is: "it is easy enough to describe a beautiful woman, but it is far better to leave each reader to fill in the general outline for himself. We feel sure that Ethelberta was tall and robust in person,⁶¹ though we do not think Mr. Hardy tells us so."

The appraisal of the end of the book, however, is worth quoting, for it indicates a deeper concern ("the verge of a tragedy") than any modern reader would be likely to feel for Ethelberta:

60 Hardy is commended for his boldness and judgment, in conceiving that whereas the elevation of one member of a family "almost always" makes him "an object of suspicion and dislike" to the others, a good story can be made out of the opposite result.

61 Something which echoes Guérard's view of "the masculinity of Ethelberta" (Op. cit., p. 109).

Ultimately, of course, things turn out otherwise than any one expects or desires, though Mr. Hardy, after leaving his readers on the verge of a tragedy, kindly lifts the curtain, and shows that it is not much worse than comedy after all ...

The next review to appear⁶² contains the unexpected judgment that "The Hand of Ethelberta belongs to the same order of composition as Far from the Madding Crowd". It is unexpected only from a present-day point of view, however, for the reviewer here is simply elaborating on a point made previously by Butler - that Hardy is a writer of romances. Given that generalization, it takes no great step to lump together two such different works, especially for a weekly reviewer. The World, moreover, suggests that Hardy is not an ordinary writer of romance, but rather an exceptionally gifted one:

It is a great proof of Mr. Hardy's skill and ability that he should have succeeded in a department of romance in which a majority of authors, however accomplished, would certainly have failed ... the problem which [he] appears to be desirous of showing his competence to solve in a succession of works is, that it is quite within the reach of an artist like himself to throw such a glamour of verisimilitude over the blankly impossible as to make it seem the most probable thing in the world. Given the characters with which he presents us, and the conditions under which they are placed, we may readily admit that their words and actions are consistent and natural.

62 World, April 19, 1876.

The review peters out after that into glib phrases ("the really exquisite descriptions of the Chickereel family", "Lord Mountclere is an excellent sketch", etc.) and pious admonitions to avoid "hurried and incurious writing"; but it had made a strong recommendation with its opening sentences. What was perhaps more important for the author was that, like the other two, it was prepared to accept the book on what it took to be the book's own terms: there was nothing yet to indicate that the book would, in Hardy's phrase, "following a pastoral tale, nonplus the public".⁶³ Nor is the picture much changed by the next review he saw, that in the Spectator of April 22, 1876, for the anonymous writer⁶⁴ takes the subject-matter completely for granted and, indeed, makes no reference at all to Hardy's previous work.

Hutton clearly saw the book as Hardy intended it to be seen, as "a comedy, a satire, on the fusion of classes",⁶³ and his criticism is all centred around this view. On these terms the book is declared a success:

63 Maitland, Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen, London, 1906, p. 276.

64 The editor, R. H. Hutton, who had also been the reviewer of Far from the Madding Crowd.

A more entertaining book than the Hand of Ethelberta has not been published for many a year. Of that there is no doubt. Perhaps the close makes us melancholy ... perhaps the drift of the satire is of a sort ... to make us melancholy ... But whatever our regret at the ending ... we will answer for it that no one will read the Hand of Ethelberta through, without being aware ... that a very original and ... skilful hand is wielding the pen, and that many of the situations brought before us are situations which only a genuine humourist could have conceived and worked out.

The review does not go on in such enthusiastic terms, however, for there is more to consider than the humour of the piece: when it comes to the "thoroughness" of the author's "knowledge of human nature" it is "a very different matter indeed". The reviewer is disappointed to find that, unlike "many of Mr. Trollope's, and most of George Eliot's", the characters in this book cannot be "known" in the way that we know "our own personal acquaintances". It is evident that this is considered a grave fault, for Hutton takes up half his review with elaborating his contention that "Ethelberta is a riddle ... from beginning to end", and that the other characters are for the most part "mere shadows that pass and repass on this lively and brilliant stage".

The trouble with Ethelberta is her apparent lack of consistency, above all "it is hardly credible that she should sell herself to ... Mountclere, with no more of repulsion and inward conflict than she actually exhibits." The reader

senses that Hutton is not comfortable with this picture of a resourceful woman, and that it is this that throws out his logic. He cannot understand how she can carry out "her policy to the bitter end without ... a struggle or a spasm of real suffering", and he has to draw attention to what he considers an incompatibility in the elements that go to make up her personality:

That the calm and calculating element is meant to be very strong in Ethelberta, we see plainly from the first. But calm and steady calculation is one thing, and the complete suppression of all the feelings which rebel against such calculation is another. ... Such freedom from jealousy, and disinterestedness is of too rare and high a kind, and seems to demand too heroic a sort of love in her, to be consistent with the cold and calculating prudence of her policy.

Of the other people in the book, only Picotee, Faith Julian and Mountclere are regarded as "real".

Hutton himself makes explicit that this shortcoming constitutes a grave defect, for

as a rule, satire which does not make you feel the reality of the life which is the vehicle of the satire, and humour which arises out of moral creations in which you ... only half believe, are not the most delightful satire,

and when the character who may be considered the pivot of the satire, Ethelberta's butler father Mr. Chickerel, is the least credible of all, it is clear that the work cannot be a success:

Thus it happens that while the whole story is a most elaborate and lively satire in the social falsehoods of our fashionable world, on the vapidness of its life, the hollowness of its sentiment, and the chasms which yawn between it and the honest labour which builds the edifice of its luxury, we do not find much in it which impresses us as if it had ever happened, or ever would happen, and are disposed to regard the whole story as a humorous fable illustrating the vices and weaknesses of the upper ten thousand, rather than as a picture of the most characteristic figures in the intellectual society of modern London.

These first four reviews are in Hardy's scrapbook⁶⁵ and, being the earliest to appear, account perhaps for his feeling that the book "was received in a friendly spirit and even with admiration in some quarters - more, indeed, than [he] had expected."⁶⁶

On the day that the Spectator notice appeared, there was a decidedly unfriendly review in the Court Circular. It carries the first note of disappointment, and makes the first unhappy comparison with Far from the Madding Crowd, which had been "a much more perfect book of its kind ... the sole defect of [which had been that] some of the rustics were a little too smart in their conversation." The point that

65 It is interesting to note that Hardy had a smaller proportion of all the reviews that appeared for Ethelberta - only eight out of twenty - than for any other of the eight novels here.

66 Life, p. 108.

has often been made in recent criticism of Ethelberta - that Hardy "observed ... his people of 'gentility' ... as an outsider"⁶⁷ - is made in this review at once:

[In Far from the Madding Crowd] his characters fitted their surroundings, and their actions agreed with the general conception of their natures ... Mr. Hardy was thoroughly at home in his descriptions of remote farm-life, in his wonderful pictures of the vagaries of nature ... But he is not quite so much at his ease in his present unnatural phase of life, and his undoubted talent seems for once to have been misdirected.

In addition to this general weakness, and in spite of the fact that the story "began most picturesquely", there are complaints about the "uninteresting and menial relations",⁶⁸ and about the way in which Hardy "devoted so much care to the delineation of individual character ... that he allowed his plot to run wild." Even "so much care", however, achieves little, for "none of the people are in the least loveable", although Mountclere is "admirably drawn"⁶⁹ and Chickereel is "worthy of pity". Above all, Ethelberta, who "chills the reader", is hard to accept, for "when the heroine

67 Weber, Op. cit., p. 98.

68 One is reminded that, according to Weber, Mrs Hardy admitted that she did not like the book because there was "too much about servants in it!" (ibid., p. 97).

69 Mountclere was a popular creation in spite of his repulsiveness: yet Weber criticized as "perverse" Guerard's opinion that he is well-drawn.

is as noticeable for her worldliness and common sense as for her personal charms, the whole management becomes too improbable."

The Daily News review of April 25 is scarcely less dissatisfied: Ethelberta may be another Bathsheba, and Picotee may resemble Liddy; Nature itself may be "exquisitely described", and "every twig and every bumpkin" may be as "brilliantly finished" as the portrait of the heroine, but there are too many things lacking. There is not "one scene so striking as [Troy's] swordplay", nor is the book "pathetic", nor are there many "dramatic situations"; "no one will cry over Ethelberta's troubles, and few will smile at them". The reviewer believes that Hardy has not yet learned that "the truth of the looking-glass to nature" is one thing and "the truth of the artist" is another: as a result "the reader's interest ... is constantly thwarted by the contradictory conduct of the heroine" in fluctuating among her four suitors - "This is true enough to life, but it is not life of the sympathetic and attractive type which should compose a heroine." The review, however, seems to be written more in sorrow than in anger for the reviewer has many kind things to say about Hardy:

The homely comparisons he uses are dignified and made appropriate by the intensity and singleness

of his purpose, while the strength of his own identity forces others to see what he represents exactly as he sees it himself. This is high art, but the highest art, which throws its brilliant life into character instead of on it, Mr. Hardy has not yet attained ... [Very few] will open this novel without reading it eagerly to the end; because the author's personality is stronger and more attractive than his heroine's. The book ... lies in a blaze of light, which Mr. Hardy makes to shine equally on the just and the unjust, on the heroine and the plough-boy.

The reviewer writing for the Standard⁷⁰ is concerned mainly with two things - Ethelberta, and the author's talents as a humourist. It is the heroine who spoils the book, the humour that redeems it. This young woman "of rare and complex character ... is not a heroine to fall in love with", and for heroines with whom they cannot fall in love "novel readers generally entertain a feeling of dislike rather than indifference". The reviewer's feeling of dislike is strongly expressed, for he calls Hardy's theme "repellent" and goes on to describe Ethelberta in terms that are clearly intended to convey her unattractiveness:

[Her] heart was as cool as her head and as sound as her judgment. [Although] she was capable of great generosity [and] was high-spirited, courageous and good-natured ... she was hard to her own weaknesses and to those of others ... [she] was as hard, as just, and sensible in her dealings with the dead as with the living.... Picotee ... is infinitely more winning and loveable.

70 May 1, 1876.

On the other hand, the book "bristles with shrewd and witty and sarcastic sayings, most of them true, and many of them pregnant with food for reflection ... we could pick out many plums from this rich pudding of wit, but we shall not do so. Let our readers fall to and help themselves." In general terms the reviewer finds much to "admire and respect", and the opening of his notice could hardly be more propitious:

This is the work of a careful artist. Every page bears unmistakeable evidence of having been written by a man of great talent, quick wit, and vigorous humour. But all these qualities are subordinated to a sound judgment and a sense of artistic proportion.

The only other lengthy reviews received by The Hand of Ethelberta came within a week of each other⁷¹ and are so different in their findings that it is hard to realize that they are dealing with the same book, yet both are articulate, kindly, and, in their way, perceptive. If Hardy read both he must surely have been puzzled - as, it appears, he often was by the critics. The Saturday's review is full of disappointment and admonitions; the Examiner's is full of justifications and hope.

71 Saturday Review, May 6, 1876, and Examiner, May 13, 1876. This is the only one of the eight Saturday articles involved in this study that Hardy did not have in his scrapbook.

In respect to points of criticism, the Saturday did not add very much to what had already been written, but its tone is, somehow, one of greater concern than that of other reviews. It includes towards the end a reiteration of

the belief which we have long entertained, that Mr. Hardy is capable of making himself a place in the first rank of novelists,

but it goes on to warn Hardy about what is required:

to do that he must ... abandon such out-of-the-way subjects as he has chosen in the Hand of Ethelberta. Mr. Hardy has rare qualities - a keen observation of nature, a knowledge of country life and its ways ... and, as he proved in his last book, a tragic force which few writers possess. We cannot but think that the Hand of Ethelberta, amusing as it is, is hardly worthy of its author's powers.

The reviewer had been distressed by the way in which - with "deliberate oddity" - Hardy seems to have tried to combine some of the conventions of the stage with those of the novel; by the way in which he finds it "hard to gain any clear notion" of Ethelberta, and by Hardy's failure to "inspire a reader with any strong belief" in her existence; by Hardy's affectation ("yet more observable here") with regard to the talk of rustics and servants; by the "artificiality" of his metaphors; and by Julian, Neigh and Ladywell and their not having been "worked out with proper care". On the other hand, he acknowledges that the author, in the

course of exploring Ethelberta's highly, indeed irritatingly, improbable situation, "has succeeded in providing a good deal of entertainment", and he especially commends, as "one of the best scenes in the book", the scene at the Hôtel Beau Séjour.⁷² He cannot, though, believe that the author's "original force" has been anything but misapplied, or that an author will fail to "prepare many difficulties for himself when he invents such a character [as Ethelberta]".

The Examiner's attitude is quite different. It unequivocally sets itself up as Hardy's defender, having observed that some readers of the novel "would not believe that such a woman ever existed or could exist", and that

granting the possibility of the character, there were many of the incidents which struck them as extremely unlikely departures from the course of real life.

The reviewer has also read the newspaper reviews and has noted that "improbability has been the main fault alleged against the 'Hand of Ethelberta' in current criticisms." With this in mind he suggests that both readers and reviewers have made a mistake:

We have always been among the enthusiastic admirers of Mr. Hardy's work, recognising in it the very highest artistic purposes and something not far

72. A scene that Wing (op. cit., p. 32) regards as reaching "farcical quintessence".

short of the highest powers of execution, and we venture to think that this accusation of improbability as a fault proceeds upon a misapprehension of the writer's intentions. ... Mr. Hardy seems to us to have deliberately disclaimed being tried by a rigid standard of probability when he adopted as a subtitle ... "a comedy of chapters" [and] 'Ethelberta' ... is a comedy of [the] sort [that] may be called ideal comedy, in which the fancy is permitted to range beyond the limits of real life. ... Characters and incidents are deliberately and consistently deflected from the perpendicular of real life to gratify the humour of the comic muse. The incidents in 'Ethelberta' are improbable as the incidents in Shakespeare's comedies are improbable. It is a work of art, pervaded by a dominant sentiment, which colours every incident and every character.

The review goes on in the most complimentary way⁷³ to suggest that there is "no falling off in intellectual force" compared with Far from the Madding Crowd; that its dialogues, its descriptions, its general proportions, are "thoughtfully calculated and firmly worked out"; and that the novel is "full of life and spirit, bright all through with the sunshine of humour and fancy".

The figure of Ethelberta is dealt with in the same sympathetic way, the reviewer acknowledging that Hardy has "burdened himself with a very subtle and intricate psychological problem". The problem arises from creating "a character in which passion is ruled by judgment", and in

73 This review, indeed, must have been one of the criticisms Hardy had in mind when he spoke of "admiration in some quarters" - cf. p. 187 above.

making his point here the reviewer ironically introduces yet another comparison with George Eliot, for "if the 'Hand of Ethelberta' had not appeared before 'Daniel Deronda', Mr. Hardy might have been accused of borrowing his method ... from 'George Eliot'". The irony comes, of course, from Hardy's having written his new book as a deliberate reaction against the suggestions of imitation of George Eliot that had been provoked by Far from the Madding Crowd; the Life has a distinctly sharp flavour in a sentence about Ethelberta:

Hardy had at last the satisfaction of proving, amid the general disappointment at the lack of sheep and shepherds, that he did not mean to imitate anybody ...⁷⁴

In spite of this, however, a reviewer seizes upon a similarity - acknowledging that it cannot be an imitation - between Hardy and George Eliot that has nothing to do with either setting or style, the features that had attracted comparisons before. The Examiner reviewer goes on to find Hardy's handling of Ethelberta herself wholly admirable:

The shifts by which [her plan] was managed, the mental struggles of the heroine ... and the grounds of her final decision, are invented and imagined with the most unfailing humour and a very sure insight into the mysteries of the conscience,

but he has even greater compliments still to offer:

74 The Life, p. 103.

... his art is very much higher than George Eliot's. [in the way in which] he traces motives with a skill not less sure and patient, but with a much more perfect concealment of the process. There is a freshness and sunny clearness about his work, a definiteness of outline, a bold play of fancy, which recalls, in some indefinable way, through all the differences of incidents and characters, the air of the Elizabethan comedy. Mr. Hardy's carefulness in construction and regard for dramatic unity is worthy of Ben Jonson himself. There is no straggling in the novel; in every chapter it is the disposal of the hand of Ethelberta that is in suspense. The connecting thread is slight, but it binds the parts very firmly together. From whatever point of view we regard the work, we find deliberate artistic aims and unflinching fidelity of execution,

and the review ends on a note that is very different from any other in a serious journal:

We doubt whether Ethelberta possesses the popular interest of some of Mr. Hardy's previous novels ... but it is more masterly as a work of art - it reveals a progress in technical excellence which makes us look forward with curiosity to his next publication.⁷⁵

75. Quoting at such length from a single review requires some explanation: it seems to me that this is one of the very few eloquent defences ever written of The Hand of Ethelberta. It may not tell us very much about Hardy - although it is just conceivable that it might make one read the book in a more sympathetic light - but, like many of these reviews, it does seem to tell us something about the society for (or possibly against) which Hardy was writing. It is, surely, another part of a story that also contains the fact that, in spite of the lack of enthusiasm of the reviews as a whole, the book sold steadily, and the even stranger fact that it was "practically the only contemporary novel on Matthew Arnold's reading list for 1888" (Blunden, op. cit., p. 39).

The point made so forcibly by the Examiner - that it makes no sense to look for probability where none was intended - made no impact on the reviewer for the Globe⁷⁶ for it is his opinion that "fiction must not venture to compete with fact in the matter of improbabilities", and that "Mr. Hardy, excellent artist as he is, has not yet acquired the gift of turning the unlikely into the likely". He acknowledges that the book is constructed according to the principles of farce, and that, by those principles, "the incidents would be quite natural and reasonable if one fundamental but impossible situation were possible"; but he cannot allow that the book succeeds, for nobody can "fancy himself in the company of his fellow-creature". It may be a clever novel, "full of lively passages, amusing incidents, ingenious similes, and witty epigrams", but these things cannot quite make up for "the entire want of human interest": "None of the ordinary elements of fiction enter into it, and its characters scarcely ask for sympathy." It is "unlikely to add to Mr. Hardy's reputation".

John Bull's dismissal of the novel two days later is even more summary:

76 May 18, 1876.

Ethelberta Chickeral [sic] is one of the most disagreeable heroines we ever encountered; and the story is altogether so unpleasant that Mr. Hardy is not likely to get the credit he deserves from an artistic point of view. The description of how a scheming, loveless and deceitful young woman made her way in the world [serves only as] a legitimate occasion for stringing together a number of able witticisms, and for making the unlearned ready with sarcasm and apt at repartee.

The Times of June 5, 1876, follows a long review of four parts of Daniel Deronda by one almost as long - virtually a column in length - of The Hand of Ethelberta. It is hardly surprising, perhaps, to find the reviewer, in these circumstances, giving over almost half of his space to a reconsideration of Far from the Madding Crowd and, more particularly, the similarity between it and George Eliot's earlier work. His conclusion is that whereas in the earlier work the new author had merited a place near his illustrious fellow-artist, the new book has so much less power that the link between the two novelists has to be reconsidered:

[Far from the Madding Crowd] was an almost perfect idyll of country life that evidently came flowing straight from the feelings and experiences of [the] author. ... on the whole [it] deserved all the admiration it receives ... Nothing is more conspicuous in George Eliott's [sic] genius than her almost Shakespearian art of clothing herself in the intelligence of her various characters ... Now, there were many scenes in Mr. Hardy's last novel that did

not fall far short of that in their own way; unquestionably they were full of the most brilliant promise, if it should prove that he was eking out slight personal observation by the warmth of a versatile imagination and the piercing insight of genius. But now that we have read "The Hand of Ethelberta", we are brought reluctantly to the conclusion that the most successful parts of his earlier works are based in the main on intimate special knowledge and something like careful short-hand reporting ... Decidedly it can be upon ground with which he is more or less familiar that he comes out in his strength or displays himself to advantage. In "The Hand of Ethelberta", much of the conversation is just about as lifelike as we should expect if it were a novel of the Heptarchy.

The critic seems to be giving the lie to any who suggest elsewhere that Hardy's descriptions are at all authentic or his dialogue sparkingly true. The Times goes on specifically to refer to the "painfully strained brilliance" of Hardy's men about town, and his failure to achieve the "charm of simplicity of style". It acknowledges, as other had done, the ingenuity of the plot and the evidence of gifts beyond the ordinary, but the ultimate verdict is unfavourable:

With our hopes raised high by Mr. Hardy's last novel, we must confess to having been disappointed.

The very brief notice in Vanity Fair⁷⁷ reaches a similar conclusion in much less space:

.....

77 June 17, 1876.

This charming and romantic book is full of complications, ... and one cannot but admire the originality of the whole conception. But, agreeable as the book is, we do not like it so well as his last, which displayed a force and tragic power which are wanting [here].

The Queen's review on June 24 says little that is new about "one of the rising lights of fiction", but another short-coming is added to those already noted, in that the book shares with most that are published serially the unfortunate tendency "to appear showy and spasmodic". The story may be "interesting from beginning to end", and "it will ... well repay perusal", but there is no real enthusiasm for it especially since "the book would be better from an artistic point of view if the aim to be clever were not so obvious throughout."

When it comes to the quarterlies, Hardy fares well, for both the Westminster and the British Quarterly⁷⁸ receive the book with delight. Both also renew the comparison with George Eliot, specifically, linking Ethelberta with Gwendolen Harleth, the Westminster believing that Hardy "may again ... divide the honours". It goes on to admire his "light touch", his satire, the "little touches and glimpses of vanity", and the talk, which is "more natural"; but the "masterpiece in

78 Both July 1876 issues.

the book is undoubtedly Ethelberta. Mr. Hardy has, we think, unnecessarily hampered himself with difficulties; but the way in which he has overcome them proves that he possesses real genius."

The British Quarterly's article recalls that in the Examiner: it is lengthy, does not waste words, likes the book thoroughly, and adds another new comparison - after Ben Jonson comes Thackeray, for Hardy has made a good claim to be considered, with him, "a teacher, if not of the greater then certainly of some of the minor moralities". Like the Examiner critic, the reviewer sees that the improbability is intended, and that by "rare psychological insight and power of analysis", Hardy has been able to "harmonise" the outlandish incidents and situations with "a certain probability and consistency of character". It is this that, not without his being "puzzled" admittedly, makes the reader so interested in Ethelberta herself, who is clearly meant to be seen as "a woman in whom passion is controlled by reason, but in whom, for her salvation from becoming a low and shameless calculator, reason needs a sentiment to stay itself on." The reviewer sees a richness that has not been seen by others: "a certain accent of tragedy" when Mr. Chickerel breaks down on hearing of

Ethelberta's forthcoming marriage; Ethelberta's "passion for distinction"; "the art of construction [that leaves] no loose threads on his tapestries"; and "a rare order of humour which is at once serious and grotesque".⁷⁹ The British Quarterly admires above all the fact that "it is one of the most masterly pieces of satire we have recently read"; and it justifies the comparison with Thackeray as follows:

... there can be no doubt that Mr. Hardy had it in his mind to satirise the hold which false conventional ideas exercise over society, - the hollowness, the pretence, and general hypocrisy of fashionable life, - no less than the idea that good breeding and perfection of manner are the monopoly of the high born, and in fact belong to blood ... The cross purposes, the conflicting claims, the little casuistical deceptions of our petty everyday life, which so tend to drug the conscience and to annihilate the grander ideals, are here held up to view by a master who, though he sees them clearly, retreats from the cynical view as from the brink of a precipice, and recovers safe standing-ground in the idea of self-abnegation, however confused the intellectual findings which prompted it.

The last two reviews to appear are both of the school that sees the book as a more or less satisfactory mixture of Hardy's virtues and vices:

79 "[It] has its basis in a deep and consistent perception of life and its issues, so deep and consistent, indeed, that the very playfulness of the mood adds to the tragic effect of the dénouement."

Its merits are fresh and clever writing, an original and ingenious plot, characters forcibly sketched and thoroughly unconventional, some really charming bits of description, and occasional gleams of quite humour. But the reader's enjoyment ... is continually being marred by a sort of stage trickiness, by straining after unnatural effects, and violent attempts to be lively and epigrammatic, which usually end in being clumsy and grotesque.⁸⁰

There is no mention of the previous books, no expression of a particular disappointment; indeed, both reviews follow the pattern of others that seem to think it natural to link all of Hardy's works together. The Morning Post⁸¹ begins its review on such a note:

How he contrives to hit upon his subjects and to know them so thoroughly ... is a mystery ..., but he certainly deserves great credit for taking us completely out of the common places ...

but it goes on to join those who complain that the characters are not "such as can be admired. They are rather psychological curiosities ..." The account of Ethelberta's career, however, makes it clear that the reviewer finds it all very interesting, especially - and he is alone in this - the reactions of Sol and Dan, her artisan brothers, to all that comes to pass, and it is no surprise to find it hailed at the end as "altogether a decidedly clever book".

80 Guardian, July 19, 1876.

81 August 5, 1876.

It will have been seen that the book had greater appeal for Hardy's contemporaries than for later generations of readers: recent critics do not come near to seeing it as "a decidedly clever book" even though some may try to salvage some good things from it. It is not only the fact that most of the reviewers found it worth recommending that is of interest, however. Modern readers should also be struck by the willingness of so many of the critics to consider his work as a whole (and five novels did constitute something of an oeuvre, even in Victorian times). Some expressions of disappointment may be found, but they are few; some pleading for a return to the countryside, but not much;⁸² for the most part there is a willingness to take the book on its own terms and to be amused, or confused, by it, as the case may be. Hardy had deliberately sought popularity and he had, simply, not found as much with this book as with the one before; but he had by no means failed to find any.

82 It is hard to see any justification for the sentence in the Life (p. 102) that speaks of a sense of "resentment" against Hardy's having departed from a rural setting.

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CHAPTER 5

"TOPSYTURVIFICATION"

i. The Return of the Native

The contemporary reviews of The Return of the Native are as disappointing for modern students of Victorian criticism as they must have been for Hardy himself; any hopes that may have been entertained about the reviewers' being able to recognize and understand an unusually good book are ruined by the sheer inadequacy of almost all the notices of this novel. The present-day reader is struck by the meagreness of their expectations, and by their unwillingness to come to grips with the unusual; he is depressed by the double standard¹ that operates and by the pusillanimity of the critic who can begin his review,

The question is perpetually suggesting itself nowadays whether it is better for a novel-writer to be clever or entertaining. Personally we have no doubt on the matter, but then the feelings of

1 The double standard that applies one set of criteria to "an English classic" such as a work by George Eliot, and another to almost every other new novel. In point of fact, as the essay on Daniel Deronda will show, the critics were not as good at applying the higher standard as they perhaps liked to think they were: for all the fine language, most of them, clearly, want little more than "a good story". The Guardian, February 5, 1879, goes so far as to make the distinction not only in the way the novels are to be criticized but also in the way in which they are to be regarded: "We may be allowed to doubt ... whether [The Return of the Native] answers the recreative purpose which is the chief justification of all but the very highest class of novels."

even a professional critic are apt to get the better of his principles. Possibly, in the interests of the highest art, we ought to hold up to the discriminating admiration of our readers the talent which we are compelled to recognize, although it has impressed more than delighted us. But we fear that if we took that sublime view of our vocation we should fail to carry our readers along with us ... We maintain that the primary object of a story is to amuse, and in the attempt to amuse us Mr. Hardy, in our opinion, breaks down.²

To express disappointment at the reception of The Return of the Native is not to suggest that the novel is a faultless masterpiece, something against which no criticism can justifiably be levelled. Such is obviously not the case: the book has faults of construction, and the writing is very uneven. There is disagreement about the success with which Hardy has created the characters who have to bear its weight.³ What can be said, however, by anyone who believes that Hardy is a major novelist, is that The Return of the Native, in spite of its faults, is an extraordinarily good novel (perhaps even a great one) - one of the best half-dozen that he wrote. The reader senses that it is greater than the sum of its parts, that "the general force of the

2 Saturday Review, January 4, 1879.

3 Thus Wing can find Clym not "artistically solvent" and Eustacia "the supreme success" (p. 56), while Brown can see Clym as "a key figure" and Eustacia as one who "does not convince, except as a silent presence" (p. 63).

conception carries the reader past many weaknesses",⁴ that "it breathes a reality that its very manifest weaknesses are powerless to explain or explain away".⁵

The critical reception in 1878, which modern readers may well find disconcerting, seems to suggest that the reviewers would not see the wood for the trees, and that being unable to accept "the reality ... that cannot be explained ..." they were consequently left with nothing much more than "the very manifest weaknesses". The reviews will show how they were, for the most part, incapable of appreciating "the force of the conception", and how they tended to concentrate instead on drawing attention to the scenes or the characters that were praiseworthy by conventional standards.

4 Brown, p. 63.

5 John Paterson, introduction to the Perennial Classics edition, New York, 1966, p. x. There is a hint that at least one reviewer faintly sensed this same point, though it is perhaps putting too great a weight on his remark to interpret it thus: "[The] defects are not so obvious to readers who are for the first time introduced to Mr. Hardy's novels, and the unconventionality and originality of tone cover a multitude of sins" (John Bull, November 30, 1878). A similar, even more tentative step in the same direction is taken by the Contemporary Review, December 1878, which says "He is an extraordinary writer; one of that rare class whose faults cannot be spared from their work ... Though you feel there is something wrong somewhere about the work, you are subdued even though you struggle ... You rise from a tale which is all but absurd ... to wish the author a long career ..."

By the time it reaches 1878, the Life⁶ has virtually given up commenting on the reception of the novels by the reviewers. There is, in fact, only a single sentence, referring to the remark of the Times that the reader has been taken farther from the madding crowd than ever, and although it is tempting to read something into Hardy's diary entry for November 28, 1878, - "Woke before it was light. Felt that I had not enough staying power to hold my own in the world" - this gloom can have had little to do with the reviewers, since the Athenaeum⁷ and London⁷ notices were the only ones that had appeared by that date. Hardy may, however, have seen the obtuse and ungenerous review of the Athenaeum as but the beginning of a series - he would have been right to do so - and have been depressed by the prospect. That the Athenaeum piece did affect him is clear, because, for the first time in his career, Hardy was provoked enough to write a letter refuting a point made by a reviewer.

The Athenaeum, which devoted less space to the book than to a review of Wilkie Collins's The Haunted House in the same issue, begins with a Jeremiad:

6 p. 124.

7 Both November 23, 1878.

Where are we to turn for a novelist? Mr. Black having commanded success, appears to be in some little danger of allowing his past performances to remain his chief title to deserving it; and now Mr. Hardy, who at one time seemed as promising as any of the younger generation of story-tellers, has published a book distinctly inferior to anything of his which we have yet read,

and then returns yet again to the complaint that Hardy's "people talk as no people ever talked before, or perhaps we should say as no people ever talk now." It takes him to task for putting into the mouths of his "peasants" such phrases as "being a man of the mournfullest make", and "he always had his great indignation ready", and reiterates its conviction that "the talk seems pitched throughout in too high a key to suit the talkers". It is this point that Hardy felt obliged to take up in his letter, and it is interesting to see that he missed it altogether; instead of replying to the charge, made on numerous occasions in the Athenaeum and elsewhere, that the language of the rustic characters is too sophisticated and embodies ideas that would be beyond them, Hardy writes about an imagined objection - that the peasants are made to speak (that is, that Hardy writes down as their words) a standard English instead of a West Country dialect. This (unasked) question is the one that Hardy answers:

In the printing of standard speech hardly any phonetic principle at all is observed; and if a writer attempts to exhibit on paper the precise

accents of a rustic speaker he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque element; thus directing attention to a point of inferior interest, and diverting it from the speaker's meaning, which is by far the chief concern ...⁸

It is easy to understand Hardy's irritation over the point he thought the reviewers were making so persistently, but there were other things in the Athenaeum review that might have struck him as being even more perverse. Why, for example, should the reviewer single out, as "a curious feature", "the low social position of the characters"; or find it strange that those of "the upper rank", while becoming involved in intrigues "almost like dwellers in Mayfair", should "live on nearly equal terms" with the workmen on the heath? The Saturday feels obliged to point out that "there must have been landed proprietors, we presume, and yet we hear nothing of a squire" - although it raises no particular objection to having only "the unadorned simplicity of nature in every shape". It is clear, nevertheless, that it regards the characters and their

8 Letter to the Athenaeum, November 30, 1878, under the heading DIALECT IN NOVELS. How one wishes Hardy had answered the actual rather than the imagined charge against him! The persistence with which the critics attacked him on this point (the Spectator, February 8, 1879, gives almost half the review to it) is irritating enough to the reader of today; to Hardy himself it must have been almost intolerable, and extremely harrassing.

setting as "somewhat unpromising materials" with which to make a novel. The reviewer, basically sympathetic as he may wish to be, is not prepared to make the leap in the dark that an entry into Hardy's world requires: in fact he can go no further than to say, "in the rugged and studied simplicity of its subject the story strikes us as intensely artificial".

There can be no doubt that the reader who believes that The Return of the Native is, at the very least, worthy of serious consideration, finds the lukewarmness, the half-heartedness, of most of the reviewers somewhat perplexing; but even more difficult to tolerate is the quibbling in which some of them indulge in the face of so strange and noble a book. The Saturday Review, for example, is not merely interested to note that there is no squire mentioned, it considers that it must take Hardy to task for his choice of names, in which "he is unreal and unlikelike; so much so that we doubt whether nine in ten of them are to be met with in the pages of the London Directory".⁹

9 The fact that the reviewer goes on to say that if they are local to the setting he is prepared to "praise them as being in happy harmony", makes his point all the more puzzling. It may be worth observing, however, that Hardy's next novel, The Trumpet-Major, has fewer unusual names than most of his other novels.

For sheer time-wasting perversity, however, the Morning Post¹⁰ review - which, fortunately, it appears that Hardy did not see - is unsurpassed, especially since no attempt is made to understand the larger issues; indeed it must be one of the most unfavourable reviews Hardy ever received. His characters "form choruses and attitudinise from beginning to end"; the heath is "finely described" but in such "verbosity" that "after a few pages of this sort of thing the reader sighs for the simple picturesque grace of a Scott or a Bulwer, so true to nature, poetical, and, above all, so excellent in taste"; there is nothing more than a "thin thread of plot which meanders through [a] labyrinth of adjectives and similes" so as to defy "skipping". The reviewer's greatest strictures are reserved, however, for an attack on the way in which "if he can by any means take ten words to describe a thing he does it, although the simplest one-syllable adjective might serve better", a point which he laboriously illustrates. There follows a savaging of Hardy's descriptions of Eustacia, in which a series of caustic rhetorical questions are thrown at Hardy, and a lengthy passage in which he is

10 December 27, 1876.

taken to task for describing Clym's troubled face as "the typical countenance of the future" which ends with the extraordinary passage:

If Mr. Hardy will take the trouble next season to walk up the promenade in Hyde park he will, if he has an eye for real physical beauty, be obliged to confess that physical beauty has not departed, and that there are many very beautiful, or, still better, handsome men in London in this year of grace 1878, quite as well built, powerful of frame, and fine of features as any of the heroes of olden times need to have been. The most eminent medical men, indeed, seem inclined to think the race to be physically improving instead of deteriorating, and certainly amongst the private soldiers are some young fellows almost ideally handsome of face and figure.

Throughout the review no effort is made to grasp what this "very clever writer" may be striving to achieve, and as a result there is only puzzled regret over the way he is "ruining himself" by his "verbosity". Even so, the book is "a very fair specimen of its class and school" -

At a period when our fictitious literature has really but few leaders of any consideration it may pass and be admired; but in bygone times, when the memories of Scott and Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austin [sic] were still fresh, and Thackeray, Dickens, Bulwer, and the Brontës were living, it would have been condemned for its glaring defects and paucity of genuine merit. When there are few giants in the land pigmies appear tall.

The adverse criticism of the descriptions of the heath that appears in the Morning Post are almost the only words that were written against those parts of the book.

Admiration for the power of these descriptions, indeed, could be said to be the only important judgment that unites the main body of 1878 reviewers. There are only two other reviews in which the view taken of the Heath chapters is in the least antagonistic,¹¹ but even these acknowledge that "the work is uncommonly well done", and "our vivid conception of the locale to which the native returned is due to ... the descriptive power of the novelist."

The writing about the Heath is, of course, uneven. When the Westminster¹² says that it "cannot well give higher praise" than that the descriptions "may be placed beside those of Mr. Black and Mr. Blackmore", the modern reader has to wonder what the standard of criticism is, but he comes to realize that it may, on occasion, be a sound one when he reads elsewhere that "few things in modern

11 The Daily Telegraph, December 3, suggests that "some facility for safe skipping" should be afforded the reader so that "those persons whose literary taste does not fit them for the appreciation of 'word-painting' may be warned against a trial of patience and a waste of time." It also regards Hardy's devoting "a whole first chapter to the description of a heath in a November twilight" as "a stretch of prosaic licence". John Bull complains of "an over-elaboration of detail" and of "a very artificial tone [which] is given to them, which contrasts much with the freshness of Mr. Black."

12 January 1879.

literature"¹³ surpass them, or that they are the work of "high genius ... a fine poet".¹⁴ These compliments are off-hand, however, compared with the long paragraphs devoted to the Heath by other reviewers, examples of which will demonstrate how accurately some of them had measured its peculiar contribution to the effect of the novel:

Mr. Hardy is a great master of the art of showing the effect of local circumstance upon human character. The description of Egdon Heath ... as a picture of solitary grandeur and gloom, of the awe which silence and monotony inspire, is not to be surpassed in any literature ... and throughout the story Egdon Heath is the genius which influences the lives of its inhabitants.¹⁵

It is a study of a wild, remote heath, on which appropriate human beings live appropriate lives, tinged, like moths, with the grey and brown shades of their abiding place. In every detail, in every mood and aspect, this heath is described so as to contrast, or compare, with the nature, aspect, and moods of the dwellers on it. Such an effort to associate matter and mind, to invest inanimate nature with soul, and to reduce animate nature to its possible origin, is not made for the first time by Mr. Hardy, but he is entitled to claim to be more successful than many celebrated predecessors.¹⁶

The subject is handled by the author as it could be only by one who loved it ... There is something of the power of fascination in Mr. Hardy's process of elaborate personification.¹⁷

13 British Quarterly Review, January 1879.

14 Spectator.

15 Queen, December 21, 1878.

16 Public Opinion, March 1, 1879.

17 Observer.

... the one great feature which dominates the whole story [is] the gloom and sombre monotony of the heath. It is in truth this inanimate object, rather than any of the men or women who move about on it, which is the true hero of the book. Its solemn aspect, its mists and rains, and shapeless obscurity are ever present to the mind of the reader; and the unhappy fortunes of its inhabitants are chiefly useful in deepening the impression produced by its own melancholy dreariness.¹⁸

There is, on the whole, nothing to match the quality of these insights when the analysis of the human characters is considered. One of the striking things about this aspect of the reviews is that few of them have anything to say about anyone other than Eustacia: only one reviewer praises Thomasin, only one says more than a word or two about Wildeve,¹⁹ and only one - most remarkable of all in the light of current opinion - singles out the creation of Mrs. Yeobright for special commendation, indeed only two reviewers so much as mention her outside of plot summary. Diggory Venn, on the other hand, seems to have aroused much greater interest: the Illustrated London News²⁰ takes him

18 Guardian.

19 "... there is nothing at all in Wildeve, as he is exhibited to us, which would account for the fascination which he exercises over two very different women" (Guardian). The fact that the very truth of this tells us something about these women appears not to have struck the writer; this is but one of a multitude of examples of the kind of unsubtle, lazy approach that the average reviewer seems to have taken to his work.

20 December 14, 1878.

to be the hero of the novel, the Standard²¹ considers him "a capital character", and John Bull considers that "Tamsie ... [is] not worthy of the constant love and devotion of Diggory Venn ... who is the truest and worthiest of all the 'natives'" though it admits that "many ... misfortunes ... [are] caused by his well-meant and somewhat blundering interference." It is the thought of Venn also that inspires the Observer to make an important point that is unique in the reviews of the first six novels:

these [the rustics and the "reddleman"] are full of life, and would be worth attention, if only because they deal with a type of existence fast becoming improved off the face of the earth by railways, building operations, compulsory education, and other agencies of a destructive as well as a creative tendency.

Even Clym himself arouses little interest or sympathy. The British Quarterly finds him "a little too tempestuous and morbid", the Saturday "a moon-struck dreamer", and the Guardian "over-strained and artificial". A few other reviewers are more inclined to give him some prominence, but for Vanity Fair²² this extends no farther than a reference to his "beautiful love-making", and for the Standard no

21 February 6, 1879.

22 November 30, 1878.

farther than a remark that "poor Clym Yeobright ... is treated by fate and by Mr. Hardy with a cruelty which he is far from deserving." Public Opinion's plot summary seems to imply a greater than usual insight into the fate of Clym and his bride:

During, as it were, a gleam of summer on the wide heath the pagan divinity and the type of progress pair, but the dark spirit of the place regards the union unfavourably, and sends restless storms of passion, and the night of death closes on the scene, and the native, his life blasted, is left alone on the gloomy heath.

Only the Examiner,²³ however, takes a more than passing interest in Clym, expressing an opinion that must have been shared by many readers, then and since:

Clym hardly betrays his tendencies with sufficient explicitness to permit us to feel that the course of life he at last adopts is quite natural; notwithstanding our sympathy both with him and with his lofty aim, we feel that he was made for something greater, if not better.

The appraisals of Eustacia are by no means uniform: there is, of course, a division imposed by the critics' differing attitudes towards morality, but there is a further division between those who believe that, however attractive or repellent she may be, she is well drawn, and those who believe, with the Standard, that some of the descriptions of

23 November 30, 1878.

Eustacia make it "difficult to believe that we are not reading a fiction by some fifth-rate female novelist".

The Saturday Review may be taken as typical of those who are unsympathetic on both counts:

the style of Eustacia's beauty is so vaguely and transcendently described that it neither wins our hearts nor takes our fancy. For the rest she is a wayward and impulsive woman, essentially commonplace in her feelings and wishes, who compromises herself by vulgar indiscretions.

The Spectator refuses to allow that the book reaches the point of tragedy in her case, because the "coldly passionate heroine ... never reproaches herself for a moment with the inconstancy and poverty of her own affections,

on the contrary, she has no feeling that anything which happens within her has relation to right and wrong at all, or that such a thing as responsibility exists. ... when the decay comes ... she is not remorseful, but only dull, in [her] loss.

The Athenaeum believes that both she and Wildeve are "both selfish and sensual" and that "it is clear that [she] belongs essentially to the class of which Madame Bovary is the type."

The three influential weeklies, however, were the only periodicals that saw her in quite such a bad light; even John Bull, while admonishing her for her "heartlessness and want of true wifely feeling and dignity", and condemning her "relations" with Wildeve as "not of a healthy character", finds that she is made "to appear worse than she was" and

believes her to be a "strange medley of contradictions" upon whom the heath life has had "a subtle influence".

Public Opinion, which sees Eustacia as "the chief character of the book", takes this latter point somewhat further:

Full of dreams of power and passion in the stirring world, the heath "was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much that was dark in its tone ..." The morbid influence which the low-toned solitude had on her seems to be the central idea of the book. Naturally dangerous because of her beauty and fervour, she was rendered fatally so by the locality in which fate placed her to be its fair but evil genius.

There are others who are struck by "the forboding of evil from [this] wild and very original character"²⁴ and "her wild restless spirit"²⁵ that would always have prevented her from finding "content". The Observer sees her as "a true woman" and suggests how

[her] utter unfitness for her existence on Egdon Heath, and that gradual failure of married life which occurs through the contrariness of circumstances as much as through any fault of her own is worked up with genuine dramatic force, allied to no small amount of psychological discernment;

the Examiner believes her to be so obviously "Mr. Hardy's favourite" rather than Thomasin, and admits that "she becomes ours also"; and Vanity Fair contends that the heroine is "one of the completest and best studies of women in

24 British Quarterly.

25 Court Circular, December 7, 1878.

literature".²⁶ The Graphic,²⁷ finally, sees Eustacia as the book's "masterpiece" a girl "with an eager longing to shine, ... condemned to ... mental starvation; ... in love really with love far more than with her lovers, ... utterly sceptical of love's endurance"; the reviewer was perhaps more right than he knew when he suggested that "of course such a woman affords precisely the material to suit a writer like Mr. Hardy, never happier than when revelling in intellectual and emotional subtleties."

The only other feature of the book that wins admiration is the powerfulness of many of the "scenes". It is clear that the episode where Venn and Wildeve gamble by the light of the glow-worms made a deep impression on many reviewers, four of whom describe it at some length. The bonfire and the dancing in Chapter 3; Mrs. Yeobright's "death walk" as the Queen calls it; and the "quaintness" of the Mummings' scene and others involving the rustics; all these are singled out for praise. The Morning Post, whose review is by far

26. The compliment London pays her, that "few of the women in fiction are more completely comprehended than Eustacia", loses some of its force when the reviewer continues, "though she remains till the end a far less impressive figure than Elfrida Swancourt, ... or even than the girl in 'An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress!'" (a story that had appeared in the New Quarterly Magazine in July 1878, pp. [315] - 378).

27. December 7, 1878.

the most unpleasant, still concedes that there is one episode ... which is related with singular power:

It concerns the fate of Eustacia, and is told with much rugged vigour, and forms a picture of a certain grandeur which elevates it much above the rest of the book.

It remains to show how the favourable reaction to various parts of the book was outweighed by strictures applied to the book as a whole; to show what it was that made so many reviewers hold back from the kind of enthusiastic blessing they had bestowed so readily on Far from the Madding Crowd. There were four main complaints:

Hardy is becoming repetitious; his world is too remote and strange and circumscribed; his style is still too mannered; and, for the first time, he is too melancholy.

Blackwood's,²⁸ in the only review it gave to Hardy in these years, admits that "he deserves credit for taking a line of his own", but insists that, like William Black, "he might have done more to fulfil his promise, had he shown more of the ready versatility to which we attach such importance"; turning to his earlier novels, the reviewer notes that "in the best things that give their flavour to the

28. March 1879.

successive books, you recognise some familiar idea that you can trace back to himself." The review turns to the new book and finds that

he hardly improves his acquaintance as we should have hoped ... The 'Return of the Native' ... might have been a clever parody of the other novels ...

In a similar way, the Contemporary is sorry to "discern some tendency to repetition of types in the leading characters"; and the Times²⁹ fears that "he is, perhaps, somewhat too partial to revelling in a monotonous round of fancies or experiences which were once original enough, but which are losing the charm of novelty." The Standard puts this tendency down to laziness, beginning its review,

Like too many other modern knights who ... have won their spurs and the applause of the galleries too early or too easily, Mr. Hardy is beginning to show signs of fainéantisme [sic] ...

and ends,

"The Return of the Native" might have been easily written by a far less able person than the author of "The Hand of Ethelberta".

It is the Guardian that makes the comment on the narrowness of Hardy's world: contrasting it with the "sparkling" world of William Black, the reviewer points out how

29 December 5, 1878.

"Mr. Hardy affects both in nature and man, the commonplace and ordinary and monotonous", and when, after reviewing the book in some detail, he takes up The Europeans,³⁰ he remarks that it is "a relief to turn from this oppressive picture to the light persiflage" of the other book. The Times seems to find it difficult to decide between admiring the way in which Hardy transports his readers "out of the well-trodden fields of ordinary fiction into another world altogether", and regretting the "novel and effective situations, improvised in the savage solitudes of these thinly populated wastes": in the end, while acknowledging that the story is "a striking one", it warns its readers

We are transported, we say, into another world; and the fact is that we feel rather abroad there, and can scarcely get up a satisfactory interest in the people whose history and habits are so entirely foreign to our own.³¹

30 The long review of novels by the three rising writers of the day (all of whom are praised) provides an instructive summary of critical standards.

31 Not all reviewers felt this way; the Illustrated London News tells its readers that Venn "is a reddleman; and as it is probable that ninety-nine persons out of a hundred do not know what that means, they would do well to turn to the novel for information. They will find themselves very agreeably enlightened, both on that subject and on many other points, equally curious, concerning the habits, manners, customs and vocations of residents in out-of-the-way country districts."

Some of the reviewers seem to link both the repetitiveness and the strangeness of the setting with what Blackwood's³² calls "a labouring after originality" that affects not only "the idea and the development of the plot" but also the "style of writing - from the first page to the last". It is this that the World³³ has in mind when it suggests that because Hardy "seems to be rather painfully conscious" of his presenting yet another rural story, he tries "to give his materials the air of novelty [and only] become artificially eccentric and bizarre." The Athenaeum finds that the fine descriptions tend to be "disfigured at times by forced allusions and images"; the Daily Telegraph complains of the "laborously fanciful description", and the "besetting tedium of over-elaboration"; the Observer is annoyed by the way in which he "obscures his treatment of perfectly simple matters by a species of sham profundity"; and John Bull observes that "the cleverness is somewhat too obtrusively brought under our notice, and there is a palpable straining after effect."

32 Blackwood's is also severe with Hardy's style: "He never serves himself with a plain phrase, if he can find anything more far-fetched ..."

33 December 18, 1878.

The review in London,³⁴ "The Book of the Week", was the first to charge that Hardy's view of life is so melancholy as to affect the working out of his stories:

The motive of the book is so needlessly cruel as to be absolutely inhuman. Mr. Hardy, like Balzac, is a lover of futile tragedy. ...* Is it possible to be in sympathy with a writer who goes so far out of his way as this to make his creatures hopeless and his readers miserable? Is not life wretched enough as it is, and must an author to be impressive invent accidents to make it still more so?

The British Quarterly expresses the opinion that "the tragedy which sets wrong things right was manifestly necessary", and John Bull asserts that "though the web of misfortune ... is skilfully woven, it is so much their own fault in most cases, that our sympathy is tempered with a feeling of 'serve them right!"; but these are in a minority; the Saturday Review's comment, "we regret the more that he should not condescend to human frivolity, and exert his unquestionable powers in trying to be more natural and entertaining", may not be worthy of serious attention but it is a straw

34 This review, like the Guardian, makes a comparison - in this case a very lengthy one - between Hardy and Black and James.

* There follows a review of some of the mischances that affect the plot of The Return of the Native.

in the wind. The Contemporary noted Hardy's "trick of confronting Nature in her lonely greatness ... with men and women sordid and stunted, blundering and ignorant ...". The Spectator, on the other hand, takes the point a good deal further, and, in a sense, opens a discussion that became a major preoccupation in Hardy criticism: the reviewer quotes the long paragraph (on page 455 in the Library edition) about Clym's sometimes thinking that "he had been ill-used by fortune" which ends,

Human beings, in their generous endeavour to construct a hypothesis that shall not degrade a First Cause, have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own; and, even while they sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, invent excuses for an oppression which prompts their tears.

The reviewer comments as follows:

All this pessimism, [35] of which Mr. Hardy speaks with the calm confidence of one who has found Schopenhauer far superior to all the prophets and all the seers, tells upon his picture of human character and destiny ... in [Eustacia's] case we never really reach the point of tragedy at all. Tragedy is almost impossible to people who feel and act as if they were puppets of a sort of fate. Tragedy gives us the measure of human greatness, and elevates us by giving it in the very moment when we sound the depth of human suffering. Mr. Hardy's tragedy seems carefully limited to gloom. It gives us the measure of human miserableness, rather than of human grief, - of the incapacity of man to be great in suffering, or anything else, rather than his

35 The word that was to dog Hardy's footsteps for the rest of his career.

greatness in suffering. ... The hero's agony is pure, unalloyed misery, not grief of the deepest and noblest type, which can see a hope in the future and repent the errors of the past. ... [Everywhere] are characteristics of a peculiar imaginative mood, - a mood in which there seems to be no room for freedom, no great heights, no great depths in human life, only the ups and downs of a dark necessity, in which men play the parts of mere offsprings of the physical universe, and are governed by forces and tides no less inscrutable. To us, Mr. Hardy is at his best when analysing, as he does with a touch of rare genius, the natural life of such a solitude as Egdon Heath.

No student of Hardy can fail to be disappointed that so good a book as The Return of the Native should have found so little favour when it appeared. He should not, however, let his disappointment cloud his judgment: he may be distressed but he should not be surprised. Thus when Miss Hardy says,³⁶

In view of its eminence today it seems hardly credible that contemporary critics could call it 'inferior to anything of Hardy's which we have yet read', and could only grudgingly admit that there were 'elements of a good novel in it ...'

she is refusing to make allowance for the public Hardy wrote for. She might more accurately have said that in view of the prevailing taste of the time it would have been almost incredible if it had enjoyed in its own day the reputation it has now. Its "eminence today" is far less relevant than,

36 Op. cit., p. 160.

for example, a phrase from the Observer review where the writer says that "The Return of the Native is for the most part written in a style almost ostentatiously disdainful of any effort to secure popularity." At least as striking is the following passage from the review in the Illustrated London News:³⁷

... an author who relies more upon the mere fringe of his story than upon his story itself for the exhibition of his powers, runs a risk of obtaining less popularity than is awarded to his inferiors in intellectual gifts and literary composition. People, in fact, will not read novels for the sake of the quaintness and the cleverness displayed in them; there must be some strong scent, whether of romance or of reality, to follow from the opening to the conclusion, and that scent must not be allowed to become so far lost that it can with difficulty be picked up again.

The wonder is that Hardy was still able to impress these conservative novel-readers in spite of the way in which he had strayed away from the well-beaten path they

37 This is one of the reviews not in Hardy's scrapbook. It begins with as strong an indication that The Return of the Native would be strange to most readers as can be easily imagined: "... from the title to the conclusion, it is assuredly out of the ordinary. The characters are uncommon, the scenery is uncommon, the dialogue is uncommon, the incidents are uncommon, the style is uncommon, the diction is uncommon". It is clear that for readers who, for the most part, were happiest with the familiar, the book had a good deal to overcome. The reviewer is so pleased with his own style that he continues, "... and, though the descriptions are uncommonly good, the movement is uncommonly slow, the personages are uncommonly uninteresting, the action is uncommonly poor, the conclusion is uncommonly flat".

so much loved. If the good novel is uplifting and instructive, is peopled with characters whom the reader feels he knows, is free from digressions from the main stream of a strong plot, is clearly and tastefully written, has a happy ending, and leaves the reader convinced that he has been involved with a real and interesting world - if the good novel is like this, then what chance has a book like The Return of the Native of being enthusiastically endorsed? If such a book had come from a writer of the stature of Thackeray, it might have had some chance of weaning the critics away from their prejudices, (although the reception of Daniel Deronda indicates that even that is by no means certain) but it is clear that Hardy was thought of as being essentially an author of the same kind as Edmund Yates or R. E. Francillon or William Black. It is true that most of the critics believed that he was a very much better novelist than all the others of his kind, but this did not give him the privilege of re-writing the rules; and by these rules a book like The Return of the Native is far from satisfactory.

Miss Hardy's paragraph on the reviews of the book is misleading for another reason: not only does she choose to ignore the prevailing tastes of his audience, but she chooses not to ignore everything that came after The Return of the Native - Hardy's greater books, his gradual acceptance as a

major novelist, his current reputation. She implies that her readers should be surprised that a reviewer in 1878 should write that Hardy "missed being a really 'great man'"; yet that reviewer could only judge Hardy by his first six novels. If Hardy had died in 1878 instead of fifty years later, would any reader now be willing to go any further than that reviewer? Would he not be regarded as someone in the same class as, say, Blackmore or Reade: the author of one or two unusually fine books and several others less satisfactory? The danger that comes from expecting 1967 reactions from 1878 reviewers is that the modern reader, failing to find what he hoped for, will fail to appreciate the quality of what he does find. Thus it has come to be a commonplace of Hardy criticism that at the time of its publication The Return of the Native was badly treated, and that, at best, it was damned with faint praise; Miss Hardy quotes some commendatory phrases from several reviews and then writes, "But having said this, nine leading journals proceeded to damn the book."

The truth of the matter is that many reviewers did not understand the book, and, therefore, did not like it; but it is also clear that there were many others who tried to understand it and did enjoy it (while not appreciating it

as a modern reader would, who reads it, after all, with the subsequent, greater, novels in mind). The summary that says that the book was badly received, and takes the matter no further, is choosing to leave out of consideration not only the good deal of perceptive writing about the heath and Eustacia that has already been quoted above, but also such assessments as the following:

Mr. Hardy is a great master at showing the effect of local circumstances upon human character ... The "Return of the Native", notwithstanding its great faults, is a work of thrilling interest, which never flags from beginning to end. To go over Egdon Heath, in company with Mr. Hardy, is worth a stumble or two.³⁸

This is an original, powerful, and remarkable novel. ... Viewed, as a whole, these three volumes present to the reader a kind of verbal landscape, in a tone subdued by technical skill to harmony, yet such as brings depression to the mind.³⁹

The fact is that Mr. Hardy can be measured by the stature and power of no one else. He stands alone, imitating none, imitable by none ... His art is a thing by itself, and will not stand labelling with the name of school or master. ... "The Return of the Native" is one of the most remarkable books of the last twenty years. ... Whoever reads it will have moments of as pure pleasure as can be given by any work, save that of the supreme masters ...⁴⁰

38 Queen.

39 Public Opinion.

40 Vanity Fair.

Mr. Hardy possesses nearly every qualification of the novelist. In the first place his imagination is quick and strong; he has a keen eye not merely for the surface; he probes the feelings; his descriptive power is good. ... he brings with him no small amount of reading and reflection.⁴¹

Where else are we to look for anything like the same amount of rugged and fantastic power; the same naturalness mingled with the same quaintness?⁴²

In this fine work - perhaps the most artistically perfect that we have yet had from him - Mr. Hardy more than retrieves the ground he lost in its immediate predecessor. ... To show to those who have eyes to see that this rural life, placid and somewhat humdrum as it may well look, viewed from afar off, contains within itself all the materials for tragedy, has been a chief aim with Mr. Hardy in all his stories, and in none of them is this aim more marked than in the book before us.⁴³

Sometimes the subtle analysis of character and motive becomes slightly wearisome, and we wish the story to get on faster; but when the true passion of it is developed in the third volume, the interest becomes intense and absorbing. ... Every character is carefully studied and artistically developed, and every touch is of careful and loving finish. The individuality of the story is very great, and in strength and workmanship it deserves very high commendation indeed.⁴⁴

41 Westminster.

42 Westminster.

43 Graphic.

44 British Quarterly.

... from Mr. Hardy we cannot expect anything usual; on the contrary, the originality and freshness of the work is such that these very qualities at first prevent our perceiving its full strength. When, after eleven months in London, we first reach a remote Alpine valley ... the strangeness of our surroundings will, for a few hours, not allow us to enjoy their full beauty. So it is with the "Return of the Native". ... [it] makes us expect very great things from Mr. Hardy.⁴⁵

It is true that there are no quotations from the three influential weeklies in this selection; it is true that they did not "like" the book, but it is also clear that they were impressed by it, and can give sound reasons, by their own lights, for not recommending it highly. The Spectator's paragraph on Hardy's view of tragedy is the product of an active mind, and should not be brushed aside in a phrase about 'an unfriendly reception'. The Athenaeum's famous reference to Emma Bovary is not so much a condemnation of the type she represents as an admonition to Hardy that work of a similar kind in England will always of necessity be flawed because it cannot be as fully worked out as it could be in France. The Saturday Review, perverse for today's student in its desire for something "natural and entertaining", nevertheless is feeling its way towards an appreciation of Hardy's strengths, and contains many felicitous observations:

45 Examiner.

... having decided to write a story which should be out of the common, Mr. Hardy has shown both discretion and self-knowledge in the choice of his scene. It gives him ample opportunity for the display of his peculiar gifts and for the gratification of his very pronounced inclination.

It was their lot to be born into "a wale", as Mrs. Gamp says, and they have to take the consequences.

The harmony of ill-tutored minds so highly pitched could hardly fail in a sensational novel to end in discord and tragedy.

There is still one review that has not been referred to. It is that which W. E. Henley wrote for the Academy of November 30, 1878, and one of those quoted by Miss Hardy in her paragraph of condemnations - indeed it is this review that says that Hardy "is not quite a great man". It deserves far fuller treatment than that, however, for it is in itself an epitome of the criticism of Hardy at this time, and of The Return of the Native in particular.

Henley begins by asserting that there is in Hardy's work "a certain Hugoësqe quality of insincerity", but goes on to wonder whether all that he admires in Hardy does not suggest that this insincerity is itself "rather apparent than real", his reasoning being that

Mr. Hardy is so much in earnest in all he does that, even when he is most artificial, he is not without his motive, and has in his own consciousness of well-doing and well-meaning a complete answer to any such charge that may be brought against him.

The review goes on to suggest how difficult it is to "render an account" of Hardy: his work does not seem "right" or "satisfactory", yet it has so many good qualities that any critic "compelled to strike a balance of opinion" will do so "immensely" in Hardy's favour. There follows a summary of Hardy's characteristics that is, considering that it is based on only the first six novels, remarkable; indeed it could serve as a point of departure for any serious study of him:

Mr. Hardy has such a right and masterful faculty of analysis; he perceives and apprehends his characters so completely; he has such a strong poetic and dramatic feeling for scenery; such a clear and vivid habit of description; he phrases so adequately and so lucidly, that, carried away by the consideration of these qualities, one fails to remember that his dialogue is only here and there dramatic in the highest sense; that there is much of what looks like affectation in his work; that his sympathy with his personages is rather intellectual than emotional; that he rarely makes you laugh and never makes you cry, and that his books are valuable and interesting rather as the outcome of a certain mind than as pictures of society or studies in human nature; that his tragedy is arbitrary and accidental rather than heroic and inevitable; and that, rare artist as he is, there is something wanting in his personality, and he is not quite a great man.

Henley is a good Victorian, and for him The Return of the Native is "by no means so good a book as A Pair of Blue Eyes", but he is quite self-conscious and candid about his preferences: he cannot warm to the book because "it is all very

mournful, and very cruel, and very French; and to those who have the weakness of liking to be pleasantly interested in a book it is also very disagreeable".⁴⁶ He is capable, nevertheless, of setting aside his disappointment to the extent of pointing out to his readers what is most worthy in the book:

... nearly all that is best in the novel is analytic and descriptive. I know of nothing in later English so striking and on the whole so sound as the several pictures of Egdon Heath, or the introductory analysis of the character of Eustacia Vega [sic]. In these Mr. Hardy is seen at his best and strongest. Acute, prescient, imaginative, insatiably observant, and at the same time so rigidly and so finely artistic that there is scarce a point in the whole that can be fairly questioned, he seems to me to paint the woman and the place as no other living writer could have done.^[47] Whether he makes the best use of them afterwards need not be here discussed. Nearly all the characters are, it should be added, of value and of interest; Mrs Yeobright, I think, being particularly to be commended.

The reviewer turns briefly to two defects in the novel - the varying quality of the "dramatics" and the "comic dialogue", and the unsatisfactory nature of the "tragic part" which,

46 He goes on, in a striking sentence, to say, "Perhaps, too, it is false art; but of that, believing Mr. Hardy to have a very complete theory about his books, I will not speak." Had Henley heard Hardy talk about this? They were both members of the Savile Club, to which Hardy had been elected in June 1878.

47 George Eliot was still living.

apart from the scene in which Clym discovers the cause of his mother's death, is "only excessively clever, and earnest, and disappointing" - and then offers a final judgment:

... in spite of these shortcomings, the novel is so clever and so strong that it excites both interest and admiration, and takes a first place among the novels of the season.

To excerpt from Henley's review the one phrase about Hardy's being not quite a great man, and to ignore everything else, seems as perverse as any quibbling done by the Morning Post reviewer.⁴⁸ It is, perhaps, significant that Hardy seemed to bear no scar from the reception, at least not one such as he would talk about in the Life as he did about others. Perhaps he had come to realize that he could not expect to win the unreserved praise of the reviewers with gloomy tales of a remote kingdom. So long as their praise mattered, he was prepared perhaps to change his course in order to accommodate them and to write books like The Trumpet-Major, and A Laodicean, and Two on a Tower, so as to show the versatility some of them were crying for. When he

48 In any case, who but a fanatic would say that in 1878 Hardy was a great man? Edmund Blunden (op. cit., p. 43) also excerpts this phrase, although he does refer to the more commendatory parts of the review as well; indeed it seems clear that Miss Hardy's paragraph is largely based on Blunden's short summary of contemporary reaction.

began the four great books with which he ended his career, however, perhaps he thought back to the warmth that Henley and others had shown towards "the woman and the place" and decided that praise for versatility was of little account compared to that.

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ii. The Trumpet-Major

In the estimation of the present-day reader, The Return of the Native brought Hardy less fame than he deserved; in the case of The Trumpet-Major the shift of opinion has been in the opposite direction. Most recent critics treat the book respectfully; occasionally, as when Miss Hardy⁴⁹ calls it "one of Hardy's most delicate, most charming works", it receives a warm tribute.⁵⁰ No one now would think it the masterpiece of Hardy's early career, yet for some of the reviewers it was precisely that: from almost all of them, it won exceptional praise, for it was exactly the kind of book that the novel-reading public wanted.

49 Op. cit., p. 173.

50 Less occasionally it is ignored altogether: Blunden hardly mentions it in his book, and Guerard, who puts it among Hardy's "worst books", makes practically no use of it in any of his arguments.

Whereas The Return of the Native had lacked almost all of the ingredients of the bestseller, The Trumpet-Major lacked none. In addition it gave especial pleasure to the many reviewers who had been following Hardy's career with interest and offering him advice at every step of the way; in almost every respect The Trumpet-Major seemed to indicate to them that at last he had paid attention to what they had been suggesting.

The book had all the virtues: a hero who was "a really fine fellow";⁵¹ a heroine of whom a reviewer could write, "Anything more beautiful, more delightful to the sense ... can scarcely be found";⁵² subsidiary characters portrayed with "truth and insight";⁵³ a plot that "could not be improved upon";⁵⁴ historical scenes "capitally described";⁵⁴ humorous incidents "admirably reproduced";⁵⁵ above all, "It is a simple story, simply told".⁵⁶ It is small wonder that

51 Whitehall Review, February 3, 1881.

52 Vanity Fair, November 27, 1880.

53 Saturday Review, November 6, 1880.

54 Guardian, August 10, 1881.

55 Graphic, November 27, 1880.

56 Daily News, November 18, 1880.

the Westminster Review⁵⁷ should call it "decidedly the best story which Mr. Hardy has yet written". Even the occasional disagreement among the critics - the Athenaeum's⁵⁸ calling the heroine a fool, or a reference to the hero as stupid⁵⁹ - must have contributed something in the way of piquancy, and helped to arouse interest among readers of reviews.

The disagreement, however, was not limited to differences of opinion as to whether or not Anne is good enough for John; there were some few reviewers who were not swept along in the general celebration. Foremost among these was the critic for the Court Journal:⁶⁰ "the memory of all the freshness and vigour" of Far from the Madding Crowd obliges him to "regard The Trumpet-Major as a second-rate work from a first-rate author":

The story is flimsy and dis-jointed in the extreme. None of the characters, save that of the hero ... [is] well defined; neither are the scenes well worked out; and, indeed, the reader's expectation of a sensational situation is so often disappointed,

57 July 1881.

58 November 20, 1880.

59 Illustrated London News, March 19, 1881.

60 November 20, 1880.

that he is induced to think the author has avoided its development through diffidence of his own power to grapple with the difficulty of creating emotion.

He acknowledges, all the same, that Hardy still has his old power in "the description of the scenery", that in this, indeed, he "never fails", and that the book is

so full of these gems that the feebleness of the story ... [is] forgiven, and contrary to the usual rule, the reader is led to skip over the narrative in order to dwell with delight upon the descriptions ...

The Court Journal is the only review that is basically unfriendly, but there are two others in which it is possible to detect some disappointment at the comparative thinness of the new book. Vaintry Fair, while acknowledging that The Trumpet-Major "has abundant merits", seems to have some misgivings:

We are not quite sure that Mr. Hardy's new book will be read with such general pleasure as the "Return of the Native," ... When we had finished reading the description of the Heath ... - a description which for tragic power, for perfect art, has no equal in our language - we could only feel as though commendation of such work would be almost like impertinence ... "The Trumpet Major" has far more of charm than any other of Mr. Hardy's books, but we miss now and then the element of power. He has tried to lighten his hand, and the result is that his work sometimes becomes weak ...

The Queen⁶¹ senses the same slight decline, but is much less unequivocal than Vanity Fair in expressing its regret:

61 November 13, 1880.

If in the present work the author's very rustic vigour is somewhat subdued, nothing is lost in interest. If the characters are not so strikingly exceptional as those in "Far from the Madding Crowd," or "The Return of the Native," &c., they are sufficiently marked to excite interest, and perhaps enlist more sympathy by being brought more within the scope of average human nature.

The three excerpts above form the total extent of any hankering for the greater power of earlier work,⁶² and the Court Journal's concern for sensational situations makes even one of these suspect.

The satisfaction of finding improvement is, on the other hand, widespread: the Queen commends Hardy for "abandoning that semi-scientific jargon which disfigured his earlier work"; the Guardian is glad to note that he "is satisfied to be quietly humorous and amusing without perpetually striving to be grotesque"; the Court Journal says that the book is free from eccentricities and the Daily News that "the critics who found his style ... obscure and illusive will be satisfied with the entire absence of any such peculiarity." The Guardian also observes that:

62. The Court Circular (November 20, 1880) goes so far as to say that the new book "is not ... superior to Mr. Hardy's first work [meaning Under the Greenwood Tree, perhaps?] nor to "Far from the Madding Crowd," but it is decidedly better than his later books"; and the British Quarterly (January 1881) makes an oblique comparison by saying that it "cannot be considered by any means the most successful of Mr. Hardy's novels." The Times begins its review (February 1, 1881) by saying that "We like 'The Trumpet Major' ... nearly as much as 'Far from the Madding Crowd'".

Above all, he is content to let his labourers and mechanics speak as English labourers really think and speak, instead of endeavouring to force upon them a wonderful dialect modelled upon Shakespeare's clowns and grave-diggers;

but the Athenaeum, which had been Hardy's most persistent critic on this point, is not prepared to go so far: the reviewer quotes two sentences and adds curtly, "Mr. Hardy has in former books done worse than this, but this is bad enough"⁶³ - a small concession.

The reviews of the book were more numerous than for any previous work, and Hardy himself collected more of them than ever before, but it is unlikely that there was much that he could learn from them - except, perhaps, to continue writing books like The Trumpet-Major. The reviewers clearly found it far more difficult to say something about a book they liked than about one they found unsatisfactory. Many reviews are unusually short, and several are well padded with plot summary and quotations, among them being the Saturday Review, which had hitherto provided much sound criticism.

63 The reviewer goes on to refer to the point Hardy had made in his letter to the Athenaeum two years earlier: "Not even his undoubted accuracy of observation in some matters can make us credit that such language as this, even if translated into the correct dialect, would have been within the compass (to use another word of Mr. Hardy's own) of the man-of-all-work in a small Dorsetshire farmhouse at the date when 'Boney' was an object of terror."

In spite of their comparative brevity, most of the reviews contain observations that help the modern reader not only to understand why the book was so highly thought of, but to see something of what educated opinion in 1880 considered worthy of admiration - in life as well as in fiction. There is no question, for example, but that the creation of John Loveday struck a responsive chord in many a manly breast. As if to compensate for its hectoring tone over the speech of rustics, the Athenaeum goes so far as to suggest that in spite of the fact that "like a true artist, he never attempts by any indication of his own preferences to bias his reader's judgment", Hardy must "like" his hero, presumably because the hero is so worthy an object of affection:

John Loveday ... is the best character that Mr. Hardy has ever drawn. Indeed there are few figures in all fiction more pathetic, and in a quiet way heroic, than this simple, loyal, affectionate soldier ...

Such praise is echoed throughout the reviews, without any dissent unless it be the note of irony in the Scotsman's⁶⁴

64 November 19, 1880. The Scotsman review - the only one Hardy received in that newspaper in this period - had begun with a very satisfactory assessment of Hardy's career up to that point: "For Mr Hardy the field in

"fine manly true-hearted fellow, gifted with quick powers of perception and an almost limitless capacity for self-sacrifice", or the British Quarterly's cryptic, "The Trumpet-major is weak". The phrase in the Illustrated London News about the "honest, stupid, 'trumpet-major'" is, in fact, a phrase of endearment, the reviewer going on to remonstrate with Hardy because

he scarcely treats his noble trumpet-major with sufficient, or sufficiently serious, respect; there is an unseasonable levity in the author's own tone as he describes the indifference with which Anne parted from her high-minded lover.

Commendation for the way in which "the simple honourable nature of the man is beautifully shown"⁶⁵ is to be found in periodicals and newspapers of every kind: publications

which he achieved his first successes seems to have such a charm that he cannot bring himself to work in any other. In "The Hand of Ethelberta" and a "Pair of Blue Eyes," it is true, he took a somewhat wider scope, but delightful though both these books undoubtedly are, they have not the peculiar flavour and piquancy of "Far from the Madding Crowd," and in his later novels there is a persistent return to his first manner of which no judicious reader will be inclined to complain. Such studies of south-country rural life and character are to be found nowhere else in English literature. They are racy of the soil. The people, their houses, their ways of thought and speech, their very dress, are delineated with Meissonnier-like minuteness and fidelity, and at the same time with a masterly breadth of humour. In the choice and development of his subjects, Mr Hardy shows a daring that rises or falls - at times to the height of audacity, and he extracts pathos out of scenes and situations that in weaker hands would be either repellent or ridiculous."

65 Morning Post, December 21, 1880.

as different as the Saturday Review and the Globe⁶⁶ begin their respective reviews by drawing their readers' attention to Hardy's achievement:

Mr. Hardy ... has produced perhaps a finer study of character in a certain sense than he was before given to his readers. His hero ... is a man who compels admiration and sympathy, and whose simple and noble nature is set before us in the most direct and simple way, revealing itself by actions which seem to him nothing out of the way, and which are left by the writer to speak for themselves without any attempt at what is called subtle moralizing, and frequently is merely pretentious verbiage.

John Loveday ... is something a great deal finer and better than the mere hero of a love story. Indeed he is so much finer and better that readers who have received their training in the most orthodox school of recent fiction will be disposed to think but little of a man who loves with so much truth and honour that passion has to be content with a place in the background.

It is this portrait that leads the World⁶⁷ to say that Hardy has "real insight into human nature"; and for which the Graphic turns its best compliment: "Very few heroes in fiction come up to John Loveday in a certain healthy and simple manliness which sentiment only serves to deepen and emphasise."

When Hardy had broached with Leslie Stephen the subject of another novel for the Cornhill, and had given him a brief

66 December 8, 1880.

67 November 24, 1880.

outline of the plot, he had been told, "I can only tell you what is my own taste, but I rather think that my taste is in this case the common one. I think that a historical character in a novel is almost always a nuisance, but I like to have a bit of history in the background, so to speak ..."⁶⁸ Hardy paid attention to Stephen, and King George himself stays on the edges of the novel and is not allowed to become a nuisance; but the "bit of history in the background" - the picture of the area around Weymouth in the days when an invasion by Napoleon's armies seemed imminent - proved to be one of the great successes of the book. Observations ranged from long paragraphs in the Examiner to the Globe's "it gains largely from its quaintly old-world flavour".

The Spectator⁶⁹ makes the point that "it was a happy thought to lay [the story] in the year '14 ... By this means an immense deal of colour and incident is introduced, which must otherwise have been lost ... [and which] helps vastly

68 The Life, p. 127. For unexplained reasons, the discussions with Stephen came to nothing and the novel appeared in serial form in Good Words from January to December 1880.

69 December 18, 1880.

in the telling of the tale"; while the St. James's Gazette⁷⁰ notes that the scenes are described "with a vividness as of memory", and suggests that there are "innumerable little touches" which seem to "come from traditional family experience".⁷¹ John Bull⁷² rewards Hardy for the many months of work that had gone into the preparation of the historical background by saying that

We may, indeed, doubt if any book of professed history gives so graphic a picture of that stirring time; ... we cannot but feel fascinated by the skilful use which he has made of the ... conditions under which the characters are portrayed. ... There is scene upon scene which might be instanced as exemplifying the thoroughness with which the author has thrown himself into his subject.

Others are less extended in their praise, but telling phrases occur in many places: "Nelson's Hardy is ... a very vivid portraiture";⁷³ the book "in all things involves [the reader]

70 November 23, 1880.

71 These include "Mrs Garland's exclamation at the sight of King George ...: 'Thank God, I have seen my King!' which would go near to raise a laugh in these irreverent days, but only seemed a proper loyalty in 1804".

72 November 13, 1880.

73 Pall Mall Gazette, November 23, 1880 - a compliment that must have especially pleased Hardy, since he believed himself to be related to Nelson's flag-captain.

in the spirit of the times";⁷⁴ it is "especially remarkable for its accurate representation of the events and associations";⁷⁵ "Mr Hardy has the skill to make his readers feel the deep truth and earnestness that was in the men and women of that day".⁷⁶

Hardy must have been most pleased by those comments that paid tribute to the way in which he had blended history, setting and story - surely one of the book's great strengths - and the way in which he had been able to do homage to the ordinary people of the county to which he was so devoted. The Examiner⁷⁷ pays most attention to this point:

Concerning the court and the senate, the bar and the literary men, the army and the navy of the early days of the century we know enough ... but of the real country life of England when the Corsican ogre was preparing to gulp down our grandfathers and grandmothers we know too little. This is what Mr. Hardy paints for us with so much vraisemblance that it would not be in the very least surprising to hear "The Trumpet-Major" was founded upon a bit of real Dorset family history. But it could not have been written without a good deal of study of ... the bye-ways rather than the highways of the time.

74 Queen.

75 World.

76 Guardian.

77 November 27, 1880.

The Graphic adds,

The humours of the time are admirably reproduced, as well as the effects of its graver interests as they come home to humble people, who, except from rumour, knew little of what was really going on in the world, and both public and personal interest are blended together in a very masterly way.

It is not surprising that the general enthusiasm for the colourful background tends to overshadow any interest in scenes from nature and life, but the usual kind words about the exquisite truth of the author's "excellent sketches" and "capital descriptions" are to be found. The Athenæum is grateful for a dozen "Dutch pictures", some of which are "simply perfect" of their kind; John Bull finds the mill at Overcombe "so well described that we almost feel as if we had seen it with our bodily eyes"; the early part of the book is one which the Daily News also finds "extremely happy, full of fine effective touches". The Illustrated London News begins its highly complimentary review by remarking on Hardy's powers of "exquisite description, as perfect as any the pen of ingenious man ever set down upon paper", and it is apparent that general satisfaction with this part of the book is practically universal.

The same may be said for the creation of characters. It is a significant tribute to an author's skill when virtually every major figure in the book is regarded by one critic or

another as the best of all; this is the case here. Not only are they "nearly all charming in their own way",⁷⁸ but each in turn is singled out for praise, so that the St. James's Gazette regards Festus Derriman as the greatest success; Truth⁷⁹ takes the whole book to be Anne's story; the British Quarterly sees Miller Loveday to be by far the best character, "honest and plain"; the Globe puts Mrs. Garland in the front rank; and the Morning Post, most remarkable of all, chooses Matilda Johnson

... in some respects the most powerfully-drawn character in the novel. ... Mr Hardy cleverly contrives to infuse an element of pathos into his description, and one feels quite sorry for the poor woman as she goes sobbing out into the night with all her visions of respectability and a comfortable home vanished into thin air;

nor is Vanity Fair alone in thinking that "the soldiers and country folk are as right and excellent as art can make them ...

They are alive, and their company makes the reader happy. There is no straining after psychologic puzzles, no hankering after epigram, no obtrusion of the author's personality. The people are made to display themselves for us without explanation, and without the subtle impertinence of comment which some writers indulge.

78 Illustrated London News.

79 December 2, 1880.

For once, in The Trumpet-Major, a Hardy hero attracts more attention than his heroine. The Examiner may draw attention to "her relations with her certainly weak mother", and come to the conclusion that she is not "a particularly loveable creature";⁸⁰ the Athenaeum, noting that "Mr. Hardy has always inclined to the cynical rather than the sentimental", may say that "Anne is obviously unworthy" of John Loveday; the Illustrated London News may go so far as to say that

as most readers will opine, she was not good enough for him; and it is almost a relief when he takes his brief, pathetic farewell of her and goes off, with a heart as nearly broken as so stout a heart can be, to have his trumpet "silenced for ever upon one of the bloody battle-fields of Spain":⁸¹

all of this may be said against her, but it is not enough to build her into one of Hardy's notable creations. The fact is that she is, as the Daily News points out, "of a character less complicated than Bathsheba or Ethelberta". She is, nevertheless, complicated enough to oblige one

80 It also makes the unusual point that "we are bound to say Anne Garland might, considering her birth, have been given a few accomplishments better than making wool hearthrugs."

81 This concluding sentence of Hardy's (a sentence that Wing says "has a poignancy sharper than the Aeschylean epitaph on Tess" - op. cit., p. 58) clearly appealed to the Victorians: no fewer than six reviewers quoted it.

reviewer⁸² to suggest that "there may be an appearance of paradox" in her: he has already shown what an intermixture of constancy and apparent fickleness there is in her:

the heroine herself is as dainty, tempting, and at the same time wholesome a piece of human flesh and blood as was ever painted in black and white; true to life, it is to be both hoped and feared, for her charms and her constancy are of the good old sort, whilst her fickleness, and her "kittleness," and her preference for the gay young scamp above the sober, steady, unchangeable, unselfish, heroic adorer, are equally characteristic it is said, of average womankind.⁸³

The Daily News⁸⁴ invokes a consideration of other novels by mentioning two other heroines, but three of the reviewers take the matter further because, for them, a trend is apparent. The Scotsman refers to the way in which Anne, though worthy of John's love, "with that peculiar feminine weakness for good looks and pleasant ways in men which Mr Hardy is so fond of giving to his heroines", gives her heart to the more frivolous brother. Vanity Fair is less concerned with the tendency to waywardness than with something more attractive:

82 Illustrated London News.

83 She is "charming and very natural, but not a personage of high moral attributes. ... everybody must like her; but the liking will be qualified by a slight intermixture of contempt ..."

84 Which sees Anne - presumably because she is uncomplicated - as "faithful and sincere, full of womanly tenderness and guileless coquetry".

Mr. Hardy has spent his whole strength and his utmost artistic accomplishment in setting for her presentment. . . . Mrs. Oliphant's pictures of English girls are exquisite, but the girl of Mr. Hardy's creation has something indefinably delicate, indefinably sexual, which the best of Mrs. Oliphant's types do not show.

The Spectator, however, produces as its critique of Anne Garland the first of what has become a long series of attempts to describe a Hardy heroine:

The heroine, Anne Garland, belongs to a class of women who are found nowhere else in literature than in Mr. Hardy's novels; whether they also exist in real life, we do not undertake to say, but after reading about them, we cannot help believing that they do. Anne is personally lovely and attractive; she is, moreover, amiable, innocent, generous, and tender-hearted, and yet she makes woeful havoc of the heart of a worthy man. She is selfish, as Mr. Hardy's heroines are selfish, - not wilfully or intellectually, but by dint of her inborn, involuntary, unconscious emotional organism. She recognises John Loveday's goodness, his self-abnegation, his lovableness, and she can no more justify herself in not loving him than she can in loving his scamp of a brother; nevertheless, and despite all the obstacles of self-respect, gratitude, and expediency, she marries Bob, and sends John to die on a Spanish battle-field. It is Mr. Hardy's delight to show his chosen woman doing these things; a hasty criticism might deem him cynical, but to us this judgment seems uncalled for. The truth is, such a character is not only picturesque in itself, but the cause of picturesqueness in others, and is, therefore, eminently suited for literary purposes. Compare a woman like Anne Garland with a woman like - to take an extreme case - David Copperfield's Agnes, or with any of Scott's pattern heroines. When a woman is governed by reason, conforms to the canons of respectability, obeys the dictates of prudence and strict propriety, and sacrifices herself on the altar of what she is

pleased to consider her womanhood, the less we hear of that woman (in fiction), the better are we content. What we want, and what artistic beauty demands, is colour, warmth, impulse, sweet perversity, pathetic error; an inability to submit the heart to the guidance of the head, a happiness under conditions against which a rational judgment protests; and all this, and more, we get in Anne Garland and her kindred. Their conduct is indefensible, but it is charming, - we love them the better for their tender naughtiness. We are appalled to see what harm these gentle, compassionate, sweet-tempered creatures can do; to remark the naive cruelty and hardness that underlie it all; but we are fain to confess that it is nature, and incorrigible, - we must even admit that humanity would be dry and frigid without it. For the selfishness is always passionate, never calculating. Whatever pain Anne Garland inflicts upon John, whom she esteems, she would herself suffer in tenfold degree for Bob, whom she loves. And let the moralist be appeased, since we may see with half a glance that the fault carries its full punishment with it.

It is the Spectator also which makes an important point about another notable quality in Hardy that is very evident in The Trumpet-Major - his humour. The reviewer argues as follows:

Although the story has [a] thread of pathos running through it, it is replete with true comedy, both in construction and in detail. Uncle Benjy, with his precious tin box ... his ravening anxiety concerning the same, his relations with ... Festus, all are humorous in the extreme,

and he has already made the generalization that what he calls Hardy's "shyness"

imparts to his humour a peculiarly delicate and delightful aroma; he never misses the comic aspect

of a situation or episode, and yet he never enforces it by a coarse or unsympathetic touch; the light falls gently and sweetly upon it and passes on. A great many modern novelists would never be humorous, if there were not so great a demand for humour now-a-days, - a demand which they feel in duty bound to supply, to the best of their ability; but Mr. Hardy is humorous, inevitably and inadvertently, - and would be so, if humour in literature were a thing unheard of until he wrote.

These sentences have much in common with some from Wing's book⁸⁵ where he shows that "an air of boisterous conviviality is about" and points to

the hilarious portraiture of a cowardly squire and his miserly uncle, and the comic richness of an invasion scare ... [and] an essential light-hearted gaiety about the book. Laughter satirical or droll, breaks through the tense moments. ... the satire is not savage: there is a good humour about it, a jocular if sometimes wry acceptance which is characteristic of the whole book.

The Pall Mall Gazette also notes how pervasive the comedy is, enriching the book's scenes "with delicate shades of satire and humour", but it complains that some of the scenes, especially some involving the miser "are rather suited to farce than comedy ... the more quiet humour to which Mr. Hardy accustoms us". Other reviewers are not so concerned about the fact that an element of farce is to be found in the book; for them it is "highly comic",⁸⁶ or at least

85 Op. cit., pp. 57-58.

86 Morning Post.

"amusing",⁸⁷ and John Bull is simply grateful for the fact that

Mr. Hardy has a keen sense of humour; ... [and that] he has so successfully resisted the tendency to exaggeration which has hitherto been his great stumbling-block,

while the British Quarterly is relieved that his "kind of subdued satire, which here and there comes near to cynicism ... relieves itself through a vein of genial humour".

The book does not emerge completely unscathed:

Vanity Fair is clearly in two minds about the ending, for example -

... the story finishes with that kind of undemonstrative tragedy, which Mr. Hardy ... inflicts on us time after time ... We will say no hard word about the cruelty of the ending, for its fitness cannot be denied. It does not leave us so happy as we might desire after the progress of the sweet and dainty idyll: but we suppose it is all right.

Both the Spectator and the Examiner believe that the book would have been better if it had been shortened to two volumes, the Examiner making the point in a charming way:

Mr. Hardy has here a very little tale to tell. His gold leaf is beaten out very thin, but it is gold of price, and not Dutch-metal gilt. ... [yet] perhaps [the story] might have been compressed ... as gold may be beaten so thin that the light shines through it.

87 Illustrated London News.

More than one review takes Hardy to task for the grotesquely detailed descriptions of the faces of Miller Loveday and old Derriman, and the Pall Mall Gazette takes particular exception to similar treatment of the physical features of the women, finding "most displeasing" such a sentence as "In turning her head round to a far angle, to stare at something or other that he pointed out, the drawn flesh of her neck became a mass of lines", and dismissing it as "the coarsest photography". The British Quarterly concerns itself with some things that are more fundamental:

Were it not for [the humour], Mr. Hardy's writing would sometimes seem hard. None of the characters rise above the level on which this strange mixture of humour and semi-cynicism so strangely plays; so that we really have a novel without a hero, and, in fact, without a heroine; for, if Mr. Hardy, as it really appears, does not care to encourage high ideals of manhood, he almost seems to aim at robbing us of the little ideal of womankind that may be left to us.

It goes on to complain of

a lack of elevation, a prosaic and almost self-assertive realism, and a dislike to look high in the field of motive-elements from which the loftiest workers in the creative field have always drawn the materials for their best and most influential effects.

These strictures sound more like the shape of things to come than a criticism of The Trumpet-Major, and in no other review is there such strong evidence of discontent.

From the rest there is a string of compliments ranging from the Athenaeum's opening sentence - "Mr. Hardy seems to be in the way to do for rural life what Dickens did for that of the town" - to George Saintsbury's paragraph on the skill with which Hardy has constructed the book:

The interest of The Trumpet Major ... is of a deliberately subdued kind, and increases from beginning to end in such a gradual manner that the hasty reader - his kind is numerous in these days - may haply think that it does not increase at all. It is not till the very last page of the book is reached that the full merit and beauty of it strike one; perhaps it is not till one reflects on the whole after shutting the third volume that the delicate composition and carefully elaborated grace of it can be appreciated.⁸⁸

The Daily News is unusually comprehensive in the long paean with which it concludes its review:

There are passages in the story of true pathos. The scene in which Anne watches the departure of her lover's ship from Portland Bill,^[89] and that in which John Loveday takes his last farewell ... cannot be read without emotion. Perhaps Mr. Hardy has never shown more literary and artistic skill than in this story. His effects are much simpler, much less complicated, much less subtle, but the lines are free and large, the grouping is

88 Academy, December 11, 1880. The passage brings to mind Douglas Brown's analysis of the strength of the book (op. cit., pp. 112-115) with its emphasis on the movement of the plot.

89 The description of the Victory's departure was one of the most popular in the book, several other reviewers singling it out for praise. The Academy calls it "the best thing that Mr. Hardy has done".

harmonious, and there is no startling inconsistency or improbability. As a study of the times ... the book is inimitable. Humour and pathos, shrewd insight and observation, are to be found in every page.

While the Globe was content to pronounce it simply "one of Mr. Hardy's best and most artistically complete stories", Vanity Fair gives it the unusual recommendation that "People should read 'The Trumpet-Major', not so much for pleasure as for the sort of liberal education which the study of it bestows."

The Scotsman concentrates on the simplicity of the book, on the fact that "the personages of the story are few, and the plot is simple", and the review culminates in another heartening compliment:

Though the personages ... are plain and homely, the theme itself is truly pathetic, and it is wrought out with unflagging power and spirit; while all the accessories of the picture are delineated with rare skill and richness of local colour. "The Trumpet-Major" is, in short, like most of the author's previous novels, a book to read and to remember.

The Morning Post takes this last point further and suggests that the book is "a novel to read through at a sitting, and then to take up over and over again. ... Mr Hardy modestly denominates [it] 'a tale', but it would be well if many works with more pretentious titles possessed a tithe of its merit." The Whitehall calls it "a novel of unusual

excellence"; the World pays tribute to an important but rare quality, "the absence of any signs of padding"; and Public Opinion declares that it is "a very finished and beautiful production, well worthy of the author's fame, and likely to amuse many generations of readers." Other similar sentences are to be found in many places:

Popular and attractive as all his novels have been, we doubt if any previous specimen of his handwork gives a higher idea of his literary skill ... The Trumpet Major, is, we think, Mr. Hardy's chef d'oeuvre. Taken as a whole, we must pronounce [it] to be one of the best novels of the season, and most cordially congratulate Mr. Hardy on a success which we hope he may repeat, though it will be difficult for him to surpass it.⁹⁰

It is not often that we come across so thoroughly good a novel as The Trumpet Major. ... lively and amusing, full of small incidents, and so cleverly contrived as to lead with undiminished interest to a conclusion which will probably be unexpected, and yet, perhaps, is all the more natural because it is not ordered on the strict lines of what is called poetical justice.^[91] But the great charm of the book undoubtedly consists in the quiet humour with which the story is told, the easy grace

90 John Bull.

91 The Pall Mall Gazette makes the same point in a more striking way: "A novelist of the last century would have done poetical justice by giving Anne Garland to the steadfast and loyal soldier; not so Mr. Hardy, who so shows his sympathy with the discontent of an age that feels that the prizes of life go, at least as often as not, to the weaker and the less true."

and power, and clever colouring, in which are reproduced, without exaggeration or caricature, the peculiar quaintness and picturesqueness of the epoch to which it belongs.⁹²

When we come to more substantial matters we have nothing but praise for 'The Trumpet-Major'... [It is a novel which the reader] having finished ... will be inclined to keep on his table and look back into once and again.⁹³

The Trumpet-Major today is nobody's favourite, and it is hard to believe that anyone would now look back into it "once and again"; the passage of time, and the extension of Hardy's genius in the four great novels of the later part of his career, have tended to push it into the background. It is, as the Daily News pointed out, "much simpler, much less complicated, much less subtle", and for books of that kind the reader can turn with greater pleasure and greater profit to a hundred books that have appeared since the last war. For the novel-readers of 1880, however, even for those who preferred the works that revealed more clearly Hardy's power, there was both great pleasure and great profit. This is something that the contemporary reviews make abundantly clear.

* * * * *

92 Guardian.

93 Athenaeum.

iii. A Laodicean

On December 22, 1880, George Eliot died; within a few days obituaries, sometimes accompanied by editorials, had appeared in all the newspapers and periodicals. Among the tributes paid to her was an anonymous article in the Academy whose final sentences are relevant to any study of Hardy's reputation in his own time:

By George Eliot's death, moreover, we are left with only one living novelist who is absolutely of the first class. Thackeray died soon after George Eliot became famous, and Dickens when she had yet much of her best work to do. During all the years in which she laboured, it is perhaps true that only one novelist of extraordinary genius has arisen. It is perhaps true that the position filled at one and the same time by Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot can be claimed at the present moment, if claimed at all, only by a single novelist - by Thomas Hardy.⁹⁴

It is one of his life's little ironies that in the same month that this linking of Hardy's name with Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot appeared in a major critical journal, he should have published the first instalment of his worst book - A Laodicean.

The greater irony, however, is that this book, which no whim on the part of any modern reader is likely to elevate from the bottom of the list, and which has done nothing to

94 Disraeli and Trollope were still alive.

keep its author's name alive, was received by most of the contemporary reviewers as though it were a significant work. The Daily News,⁹⁵ for example, concludes its review with a judgment that would find no modern counterpart:

The level of the story is more even, because more polished. It is never dull, and the author's ranges of heart-searching are not less profound because the heaps of material thrown up in the process are less prominent. It is full of incomparable humour and subtle study of manners, and delicate observation of minute gradations of mental processes. In a word, it is one of Mr. Hardy's stories of English life. Perhaps not his best, but better than most other people's best.

Even this, however, is mild compared with the opening sentences of an absurdly inflated notice in the Court Circular on the same day, a review that would justify both Lewes's despair of novel-reviewing and the contempt in which present-day critics hold their Victorian predecessors: if ever a review manifested an absence of critical standards it is surely one which can claim that A Laodicean "may be placed on an equal pedestal with the best works of authors of English fiction" and which says that the book entitled Hardy to a place beside Scott, Thackeray and George Eliot.⁹⁶

95 January 28, 1882.

96 The review also demonstrates a carelessness that does nothing to inspire confidence, for it begins, "On the day when his first work appeared it was universally acknowledged that Mr. Hardy had made a mark upon English literature."

The new book, it is claimed, is "a splendid crown" for the "stately edifice already erected". What makes this exaggeration particularly difficult to understand is the lack of any substantiation for it in the review that follows, unless a detailed account of the early part of the plot be regarded as sufficient. The opening episode is described as "dramatic", and Dare as "very remarkable and finely-drawn"; apart from that, the only critical comment has to do with "the language, both of gentle and of simple", which is "as a matter of course when we are reading Mr. Hardy, quite perfection".

This kind of adulation may be dismissed as unthinking enthusiasm, but far more responsible reviews take the book seriously and still hold it up for admiration. The Athenaeum⁹⁷ finds Paula "perhaps the most charming of Mr. Hardy's heroines" in spite of her faults, and, noticing resemblances with Desperate Remedies,⁹⁸ remarks how interesting

97 December 31, 1881.

98 "The architectural 'business', the introduction of two persons in somewhat mysterious relation to each other, the comparatively sparing use of the rustic element." The Saturday Review (January 14, 1882) makes a similar comparison, adding, "but, if we remember rightly, there was more of the rustic flavour in the former."

it is "in many ways to observe the improvement which ten years have brought". Similarly, Vanity Fair,⁹⁹ a faithful follower of Hardy's progress, observes how "Mr. Hardy's power of description has grown with his other powers" and goes on,

... there are chance passages in "A Laodicean" which for majesty of prose, and for instinctive comprehension of external nature, are better than anything Mr. Hardy has yet done. We might go on choosing other merits for mention, but the process would be long, for the book contains nothing but good work. It is very pleasant to read a story on which thought and skill and rigid care have been expended by a man of extraordinary ability.¹⁰⁰

The Vanity Fair review is, as usual, a brief one; but it is noticeable that many other complimentary reviews are also short, leading in almost every case to the irritation of seeing large claims made for the book without any supporting statements to justify or illustrate them. The Morning Post¹⁰¹ review is such a case: the only detailed observation in its thirty-four lines has to do with Somerset's sketching,¹⁰²

99 January 14, 1882.

100 One wonders what Hardy would have made of this tribute to his "rigid care" considering the actual circumstances - dictation from a bed of pain - in which the book had had to be finished.

101 January 19, 1882.

102 The first pages of the book. This, and the fact that Hardy is said to have "placed his scenes for the major part on the Continent", makes one wonder how thoroughly this reviewer had read the book.

which is praised lavishly:

As a piece of mere word painting the scene is admirable for its terseness of style and picturesqueness. There is not a word too much, not a line could be spared.

For the rest there is nothing more than generalized commendation:

It would be impossible in a necessarily short notice to do justice to Mr. Hardy's remarkable work; suffice to say that, whilst it contains all his peculiarities, good and evil, it is, if anything, superior to its popular predecessors. To say this is to indicate that it is a work well worth reading, even by those who only occasionally indulge in novel reading rather as a study of literary style than for mere amusement.

The one feature of the book that is obviously attractive - although there are few explicit references to it - is its originality, its dealing with topics that are new to the reader. Eleven of the sixteen reviews include a description of Paula's last-minute refusal to be baptized; the reviews use the incident, as Hardy does, to introduce the sermon which justifies the book's title, but the reader senses also that the reviewer means to indicate that the book is concerned with unusual, even outlandish, phenomena. References to Paula's personal telegraph are numerous, and various reviewers make much of Dare's tricks with photography, or the restoration of the castle, or the dispute between Somerset and the Baptist parson which first brings

Somerset and Paula face to face: one reviewer draws particular attention to the novelty of this episode -

... he rescues [Miss Power] from peril, as a hero should, but from a peril of a kind as yet new in novels. Miss Power is, in fact, being preached at by the minister ... when Somerset strikes in and puts the worthy man to rout by a discourse of theological learning.¹⁰³

The modern reader of these reviews senses that many of them are trying to point out not only how versatile Mr. Hardy is, but how very up-to-date. The Observer¹⁰⁴ indeed, draws attention to Paula's dilemma - the dilemma facing the new generation - and in doing so makes one of the few points of criticism that would be likely to appeal to a critic now:

This strange episode [the uncompleted baptism] which is forcibly set before us at the beginning of the story with a premeditated object, gives the clue to the whole character. Miss Power is at war with herself. She respects her father's life and work and creed, and yet she wishes vaguely that she had been one of the useless improvident.

This same point is made in a more general way at the beginning of the Court Journal's review of "one of [Mr Hardy's] numerous series of modern romances", where the reviewer sees the book as a description of "the conflict between the aristocracy of high birth and long descent and that of our time,

103 St. James's Gazette, January 4, 1882.

104 February 4, 1882.

that of the industrial nobility".¹⁰⁵ The Queen¹⁰⁶ makes the point that Paula is "in fact, as 'mixed' as her surroundings", and, drawing the reader's attention to the last line of the novel - "I wish my castle wasn't burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy" - observes that "the story is a lesson for those who would put old cloth on new garments".

Other reviewers are attracted to Paula, not because she personifies a contemporary dilemma, but, more simply, because she is the latest of Hardy's heroines. There is no doubt that, among his regular readers at least, Hardy had acquired a high reputation for being able to explore the female mind in all its variety. The Athenaeum begins its notice with a reference to this:

Mr. Hardy would seem to have set before himself the task of illustrating in every conceivable way the Virgilian dictum about the nature of women. [107] His heroines have their stations in many ranks of life; they are diverse in character and in attraction; but all have the common fault of their sex ...

105 January 28, 1882. Although the review peters out into a catalogue of events and a lengthy excerpt, it does end with another sentence worthy of note: "... the novel is written throughout with the great aim of giving the reader food for reflection as well as amusement."

106 January 14, 1882.

107 Presumably "Varium et mutabile semper femina". The Saturday Review notices that "it is a peculiarity of Mr. Hardy's heroines never to accept a lover at once ..."

The Globe¹⁰⁸ goes so far as to concentrate its whole review on Paula:

As usual ... [Mr. Hardy] has invented an entirely new heroine, and has made her act very consistently with herself, if very unlike ordinary mortals. ... the principal interest of her story ... depends upon the combination of a seemingly Laodicean half-heartedness in love, religion, art, and things in general, with a real grandeur of character too wide and too high to be content with one-sided views or with anything which does not reach up to her whole ideal.

Not all the reviewers are captivated by Paula, however. The Academy¹⁰⁹ sees her as "commonplace" and the Guardian¹¹⁰ as "feeble"; the St. James's Gazette complains that "she falls far short of Ann Garland or Bathsheba".

It is the Spectator,¹¹¹ whose review is again much the fullest, that is most thorough in considering the various ingredients in Paula's character. It does so after another illuminating introduction on the general subject of Hardy's heroines:

108 February 17, 1882.

109 January 7, 1882.

110 July 19, 1882.

111 March 4, 1882.

In previous works ... Mr Hardy has shown a talent for depicting heroines the reverse of common-place, and belonging to a class of their own. One feels sure that their living originals never really have existed, though still they might have done so; and that they are at once drawn from life, and yet creatures of his own imagination. He studies, not from one woman but from many; he takes a fault from one, a virtue from another, a foible here, a strong point there ... and then combines all into an imaginary but not impossible whole, which shall stand out prominently in the minds of readers, and form a landmark in the ever-increasing haze that is apt to reduce ordinary fictitious characters to one common blank in the landscape of memory.

As for Paula, she is "thoroughly modern, restless, active, and intelligent"; her coquetry is seen as "apparently innocent, but really most dangerous"; the reviewer weighs her in the social balance and finds her wanting -

... other small matters, such as the unembarrassed manner in which she discusses her love-affairs, and the readiness with which she shows a lover the exact spot her lips have pressed on a glass out of which she has just drunk ... convey a want of natural refinement and touch of vulgarity that are quite in keeping with her plebeian origin;

and dwells at some length on her "artistic predilection" to be a De Stancy. On the whole, the reviewer finds that "the study of this curious, uncommon, but by no means inconceivable middle-class young lady" is, at least, "very interesting".¹¹²

112 The Illustrated London News (February 4, 1882) sees the poor girl in yet another light: "She is not cast in the heroic mould, by any means; she is constantly betraying a somewhat snobbish sense of being deficient in 'blue' blood ..."

Hardy's example of the new womanhood arouses a good deal more interest than his new attempt to draw a man of the future in the person of George Somerset.¹¹³ The Academy finds him uninteresting, the Athenaeum is sorry that he is only "amiable but somewhat commonplace".

("[readers will] regret that ... she should not have mated with one more like our friend of last year, John Loveday"), and the Observer suggests that Paula's "caprices are not nearly so unnatural as Mr. Somerset's lack of manly pride in not sooner asserting his independence of this singular fiancée".¹¹⁴ Most reviewers who concern themselves with the minor figures are struck by the originality of the conception of Dare, and find him a striking character; but the St. James's Gazette objects that "Mr Hardy has given way ... to a sheer love of grotesque ornament" in creating

113 Somerset is described (p. 5) as follows: "Briefly, he had more of the beauty - if beauty it ought to be called - of the future human type than of the past; but not so much as to make him other than a nice young man." One wonders if the qualifying clause at the end is not an acknowledgement of the rebuke Hardy received at the hands of the Morning Post on account of his description of Clym.

114 It goes on to suggest - in a remark that could find a place in a serious study of Hardy's heroes - that Somerset is "more like a woman's hero than a man's ... his sufferings do not excite very much compassion."

both him and Abner Power,¹¹⁵ while the Spectator does not consider the villain to be "a satisfactory one; he seems often strained and unnatural, especially in his cool patronage of his father, which is rather amusing, but highly improbable."

Although the book won far more approbation in 1882 than it has ever won since, the reception was by no means unmixed. Several reviews included a note of regret that Hardy had forsaken the scenes of his best previous work. The Observer reviewer, for example, while criticizing the "good many unreasonable folk who are always wanting an author to repeat his best hits", admits that "we miss with regret the quaint out-of-the-world surroundings of Bathsheba" and notes that there is very little of the quiet rustic humour in which Hardy's touch is "much truer and safer".¹¹⁶ The Illustrated London News is much more direct in its criticism:

115 The Saturday Review unwittingly points to one part of the slipshod work that Hardy produced in the latter half of the book: "Nothing that this uncle ... does is quite fully accounted for, and he seems little more than a grotesque excrescence on the story."

116 The Daily News is more sympathetic: "Some critics may think it a pity Mr. Hardy should ever wander from the rustic ways he so profoundly sympathises with and understands. But even they must approve the conscientious effort of a thorough artist to avoid the risk of getting into a groove."

The novel, on the whole, though very amusing and pleasant in parts, is not among the best specimens of the author's powers; there is less originality, save in details and in diction, less substance, less force, less finish than his readers are accustomed to expect.

It also, more than any other review, detects the unsatisfactory circumstances of the book's composition not only in noting the extent of the "padding" - "though the chief place ... be assigned to architecture, the author has evidently looked up his photography, his telegraphy, and his theology also as secondary auxiliaries" - but in the more general comment with which the review concludes:

... nobody can be surprised if even Homer sometimes nods; and everybody should be thankful for the good in the absence of the best. An author is sometimes hurried in his composition by circumstances beyond his control, or, good faith, finds it convenient, and small blame to him, to put forth only a portion of his strength.¹¹⁷

117 The Spectator is the only other review that matches the Illustrated's perspicacity: "The first two volumes are the best; in the third ... the progress to the general wind-up is somewhat spasmodic and jerky, suggesting a series of what musicians call false cadences, wherein the ear is deceived by being led to expect a final and resting chord which does not come. And is there not throughout the whole book a little more display of the author's technical knowledge of architecture than will be appreciated by the mass of readers ...?"

Even here, however, the tone is sympathetic: the Guardian, on the other hand, leaves no doubt in the minds of its readers as to where it stands:

Some readers will probably think that the many blemishes in the style, the perpetual exaggeration, the continual attempt at sensational effects, and the wild improbabilities introduced into the story, render it uninteresting as a whole, and in many places, as in the scene on the trapeze, positively disagreeable. Others will probably judge, that these defects are atoned by the ingenuity and cleverness with which the incidents, even the most absurd of them, are handled, and the vivacity, eagerness, and vividness, and notable power of graphic description in few words, with which the tale is told. Our own verdict would be with the former. ... the author, in the perpetual straining to be witty and epigrammatic, continually becomes stiff and forced and almost ludicrously unnatural.

The Guardian was not the only journal to look unfavorably on "the scene on the trapeze": four others refer to it, all in terms that suggest a warning to Hardy that he has come uncomfortably close to giving serious offence. It is interesting to observe the various ways in which the reviewers broach the matter; the following excerpts are from the Athenaeum, Observer, St. James's Gazette and Saturday Review, respectively:

... the modern version of the story of Gyges will displease many readers. Without being in the least a "fleshly" writer, Mr. Hardy has a way of insisting on the physical attractions of a woman which, if imitated by weaker writers, may prove offensive.

This [the "doctored" photograph] is by no means the only whimsical detail of the story. Who, for instance, but Mr. Hardy would have dared exhibit his heroine to one of his heroes as Miss Power is exhibited to Captain De Stancy whilst practising in her gymnasium? No harm is intended by the passage, and the writer is clearly unconscious of its riskiness when he describes not only how "Paula in a pink flannel costume, was bending, wheeling and undulating in the air like a goldfish in its globe," but with what feelings the hidden spectator looked on at "the festival of this Bona Dea". The introduction, however, of such an episode so freely dealt with is a mistake, especially as nothing of the kind is needed to account for De Stancy's very natural fascination by the pretty heiress.

... the artful schemer arranges that [Captain De Stancy] shall see Miss Power under circumstances that shall strike his imagination. This is managed in a scene which is probably due to Mr. Hardy's sense of fun, but which strikes us as just a little risky.

Dare manages to overcome [De Stancy's renunciations of love] in a manner more strange than pleasing. Indeed it is matter for wonder that Mr. Hardy should have employed the very odd incident which serves to make De Stancy wish for an introduction to Paula - an incident which, if it were not related with such evident unconsciousness, would certainly go near to being offensive.

It is clearly possible to detect, however, a tolerance in all these strictures that would have been most unusual a decade earlier. It is perhaps a good indication that the reviewers had learned that Hardy was to be taken seriously, that he was more concerned with the inter-play of different kinds of people, and with the effects of environment and change, than with sensationalism or with straightforward romance.

The most striking deduction that is to be made from these reviews is, without question, the fact that Hardy, at this stage of his career, was not seen as the novelist of Wessex. This is, in a sense, not at all surprising: only three of his eight novels up to that point had been products of what is now thought of as being Hardy's world - the region surrounding Dorchester at the mid-point of the century. There is ample evidence that Wessex had made an impact on the reviewers (though it produced, for most, a rather superficial wound) and that many, if not most, of them were to some extent disappointed when a new book did not carry them back to it. This is not the same as saying, however, that they recognized that it was only from Wessex that Hardy derived real strength. They were concerned not with the richness of the world of an artist's imagination so much as with incidents, humour, heroes and heroines, reasonable elegance of style and reasonable ingenuity of plot. To an extent that most modern readers cannot be, they were prepared to consider each book on its merits, comparing it not only with previous books but with the rest of the novels being written. They were, in this, more tolerant than the reader who reads Hardy now as 'literature' and seeing where his real strengths lay regrets that he should

have turned aside. The opening sentences of the review in the Saturday provide an example of the gap between contemporary reviewing and literary criticism; no critic now would see any point in writing them, for they are irrelevant to any consideration he would have in mind:

A novelist cannot be expected to go on for ever turning out precisely the same kind of work which first made his name famous, and it would not be difficult to point to instances of an attempt to do so being followed by most unsatisfactory results. Mr. Hardy's many readers, then, will have no right to complain of not finding the accustomed rustic flavour in his latest work.

This reviewer is concerned, in this review, only with "some very odd events [which] take place amid the surroundings of modern civilized life".

The fact that nine periodicals that reviewed The Trumpet-Major ignored A Laodicean, the brevity of many of the reviews (some in periodicals that often contained much lengthier ones), and the large amount of plot-summarizing in many of those that are long, all seem to indicate that the book had no great appeal, at least of a kind that was susceptible to analysis, and that a few flowery compliments or mild rebukes were sufficient by way of comment on the latest work of a distinguished contemporary. The review

in the World,¹¹⁸ one of the briefest, in a sense says all that most readers would want to know:

A curious and clever mixture of sensationalism, philosophy, religion, spiritual affection, and carnal suggestiveness. It is not a combination which will please all tastes, but there is no doubt as to the skill with which the ingredients are blended. As for the characters, the masterful woman, the patient and long-suffering lover, the cynical man of the world, and the little group of peasants, Mr Hardy has depicted them all before. Yet the book is not wanting in freshness ...

118 January 11, 1882.

PART THREE

HARDY'S MAJOR CONTEMPORARIES

CHAPTER 6

FIVE BOOKS THAT HAVE SURVIVED

i. Erewhon

Samuel Butler's satirical novel, published anonymously in the second week of April, 1872, stands in sharp contrast to Hardy's early work. For Butler, the novel is a means to an end, a vehicle conveying a point of view. For him, the 'story' is of little importance compared with the ideas, the life-view, that it enables him to present. For Hardy, on the other hand, if his books had any 'end' other than themselves, it was the rather mundane one, at least during the first half of his career, of earning him a living and giving him an entrée into literary society. There is nothing to suggest that he was concerned at this time with 'using' the novel. None of the early books takes the reader very far into Hardy's mind (although perhaps A Pair of Blue Eyes tells something about his heart), nor does any invite the reader to consider any abstract idea or scheme of morality in a way that is common later in Hardy's career. This difference between the early Hardy and the precocious Butler is reflected in the reviews they received. Everything about the reviewing of Hardy's first books suggests how ordinary a writer he was, how standard his view of the world

and of his profession.¹ The reviews of Erewhon, on the other hand, show that Butler had stirred his fellows and made them think. The book was capable of being assessed on more than one level, and reviewers who felt at home with social as well as literary criticism were given an opportunity to write at great length about issues and ideas.

Samuel Butler's biographer, Festing Jones, says that "Erewhon at once took its place in the front rank among works of satire and imagination" and that it "created a sensation".² Butler himself, referring to his view that the book was "all very well as a beginning, but nothing more", goes on:

I do not doubt that Erewhon owed its success in great measure to its having appeared anonymously ... The reviewers did not know but what the book might have been written by a somebody whom it might not turn out well to have cut up, and whom it might turn out very well to have praised.³

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- 1 This is still true even when his setting is off the beaten track and some of his subject-matter is unfamiliar - most of the reviewers of Under the Greenwood Tree, for instance, feel that they have to explain what a tranter is - but they know that in any important sense they are on familiar ground.
 - 2 Henry Festing Jones, Samuel Butler, Author of Erewhon, A Memoir, London, 1919, Vol. I, pp. 152 and 153.
 - 3 Ibid., pp. 154-5. Festing Jones goes on to link the reviewers' attitude to the rumour that Lord Lytton had written The Coming Race (1871) and perhaps Erewhon as well: "At all events, as soon as the Athenaeum announced that Erewhon was by a nobody the demand fell 90 per cent" (p. 155).

Certainly the first edition of a thousand copies was sold out by the end of May,⁴ but it is far from certain that this success had much connection with the reviews of the book, for some of them (despite what Butler's note says) were far from friendly.

That there was great interest in the book, however, may be deduced from the alacrity with which it was reviewed: of the twelve notices on which this study is based, six appeared before April was out and ten before the Athenaeum disclosed the identity of the author on May 25. The three major weeklies all reviewed it on April 20, ten days after the publication date, but they had been forestalled by the Echo, which had written it up more than a week earlier. The Echo's review, although not substantial nor penetrating, must have been helpful in getting the book off to a good start, for it is both enthusiastic and sufficiently full to give the reader a good idea of what to expect. It is a long review, a whole column, but almost all of it describes episodes in the book and the customs

4 Thus more copies of Erewhon were sold in six weeks than were sold altogether of Hardy's first three works.

and attitudes of the Erewhonians,⁵ only the first and last paragraphs expressing any opinion of the book's merits:

There can be no doubt that "Erewhon" ... is a very clever, striking, and original book, and that its anonymous author gives proof in it of considerable humour and real power and subtlety of thought. It belongs to the same type as "The Coming Race" ... though it is in every way far superior to that tedious volume. ...

There is much else ... to which we should like to draw attention ... But the subject would exceed our limits. We must, however, remark ... that the author is what it is the fashion to call "an advanced thinker", of an extreme type, and that his views lead him sometimes into decided unfairness - as, for instance, in the chapter on "Birth-Formulae", which is meant as a sneer at Baptism. Of the ability displayed in the book there can, however, as we said before, be no question.

The reviewer in the Athenaeum was ready to dispute this opinion. The notice begins ominously: "nothing is so dangerous as the attempt to write an allegory of any length", and it goes on to show that the writer of Erewhon has not the ability to bring the attempt off - "he has produced but a slovenly result". It is clear that the writer is not in sympathy with this satire of "the beliefs and opinions current amongst his countrymen" and the only complimentary parts of the review are those which deal with the early

5 Most of the space is, in fact, assigned to illustration of the "illness is crime, crime is illness" inversion. The Musical Banks, and the Colleges of Unreason are not mentioned at all.

chapters of the book, which are described as "extremely good, especially the last scene among the ten fiendish statues", although even here the reviewer's pleasure is spoiled because he cannot tell "what part, if any, they bear in the allegory. We thought at first they might be the Ten Commandments, but we could not make this fit in any way, so we gave it up." The greater part of an unusually long review (the book has a notice to itself) is given over to the details of some of the satirical ideas, especially the destruction of the machines,⁶ and the transposition of crime and illness. The tone of the review is throughout carping and petty: errors of logic are seized on and held up to ridicule,⁷ always scrupulously quoted in the author's own words. The summing-up is obviously intended to dismiss the book from further consideration:

We cannot go in detail through all the absurdities and inconsistencies of the book without writing another as large, for which our readers would assuredly not thank us. The author is evidently far more in his element when sheep-farming in Australia, or exploring snowy mountains, than when he attempts to revolutionize sociology or

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- 6 "An attempt to reduce to the absurd the whole theory of evolution. Mr. Darwin, however, can take good care of himself, so we have no need to expose the fallacies which are sufficiently transparent, here as elsewhere."
- 7 The reviewer himself has incorrectly deduced that "we can easily discover" that Australia is the colony "which is ostentatiously not named".

theology; even when he has "got hold of the right end of the stick" we had rather see it out of his hands, for he does not know what to do with it, and to his attacks on Revelation and Christianity we fancy the most convinced materialist would say, non tali auxilio.

A reader of the Saturday Review would have found a far more relaxed and good-humoured criticism; the reviewer sees Erewhon as being the same kind of place as "the valley from which Prince Rasselas started ... the country to which Candide was carried ... and the islands first made known to us by the daring researches of Captain Gulliver." The tone suggests that the book will stand this comparison with the great satires of the past.⁸ The Erewhonians are seen as "an amusing race of people, and it may occasionally do us good when laughing at their grotesque habits to remember that our habits may seem equally grotesque to them." The reviewer then proceeds to "mention one or two of the most striking peculiarities of this original people."

He turns his attention first to the attitude of the Erewhonians to illness and crime. Unlike most other reviewers, he does so not merely to provide his reader with a superficial summary of Butler's idea, leaving each man to draw his own conclusion, nor to hold the idea up to ridicule;

8 It is perhaps significant that the Athenaeum, treating it primarily as allegory, makes a comparison with Pilgrim's Progress.

rather he is seriously concerned, after summarizing it fairly, to dispute the idea rationally and at some length.⁹ The summation has at least the ring of Victorian common-sense:

It is essential that certain qualities should be the object of extreme disapproval, because that disapproval is the best means of keeping them down. Disapproval, unluckily, has very little tendency to suppress consumption, though it may and ought to suppress some practices that lead to consumption; and therefore it would be a waste of good hatred to detest an invalid; but it does and can have a very potent effect upon checking the development of murderous and other immoral propensities, and should therefore be stimulated in regard to them as much as possible.

The reviewer is able to devote much less space to "sundry other peculiarities, equally queer": the abandoning of machines,¹⁰ the Colleges of Unreason, and the established religion of Erewhon, for which "the author reserves his most bitter attacks", but he does do more than simply chronicle them. His view of the whole book, contained in the last sentences of the notice, is a mixture of satisfaction and disapproval:

There are ... a good many ingenious remarks and some caustic hits in the book; elsewhere it degenerates into somewhat commonplace and easy satire; and, on the whole, the allegory seems to be rather too far-fetched and complicated to have the desirable brilliance of effect.

9 Approximately 600 words.

10 "which will probably please Mr Ruskin".

The Daily News review published four days later keeps the critical pot boiling without adding much in the way of new ingredients. It links the new book ("full of quaint and curious conceits") with The Coming Race, summarizes in one sentence the early adventures of the narrator and gives in broad outline the main customs of the Erewhonians, which, according to the reviewer, are described with "a circumstantial and Defoe-like minuteness". He sees the Colleges of Unreason as having "prototypes nearer home", and makes no lengthier comment on the satire of religion than, "the moral of musical Banks, he who runs may read". The main part of the review is devoted to the banning of the machines, an idea that seems to hold considerable appeal for the reviewer:

This theory he supports with a series of arguments so precise, so logical, and so convincing, that the reader ends by looking on a steam-engine as a species of Frankenstein, and cordially agrees with the Erewhonians in relegating a monster with such overwhelming capacities to a museum. We recommend scoffers at this theory to make its acquaintance in full in the pages of "Erewhon". They will spend some pleasant hours in very agreeable and surprizing company ...

Perhaps the most sympathetic review of Erewhon appeared in the Examiner.¹¹ It stands in strong contrast to that of

¹¹ April 27, 1872.

the Daily News and the other newspaper criticisms, not only on account of its length, but because it is prepared to take the business of criticism more seriously. By doing so it invites a more intelligent audience to read the book, and to treat it with respect. It is not that its conclusions are very profound, or its language very complex, or its tone very elevated: it is simply that intelligence and good sense permeate the review rather than mere curiosity, amusement or prejudice. It makes the fundamental point about satire clearly and forcibly:

To help us to see ourselves as others see us, to examine ourselves from an entirely indifferent and external standpoint, nothing is better than fiction. We are so completely at the mercy of traditional views, that even originality is seldom more than a leap from one set of formulae to another. ... Yet, strangely enough, while we resent with indignation any effort to demonstrate the unsoundness of our own opinions, we are prepared to listen to descriptions of the wildest and most extravagant opinions of other people. The author of 'Erewhon' has availed himself of this singular feature of our character, and has ... held us up to ridicule, and treated our most cherished opinions with biting scorn.

The reviewer, after comparing this author with Swift,¹² gives an outstandingly fair and full summary of what the

12. The book falls short of Gulliver's Travels because "it is too abstract, too thickly studied with argumentative expostulation, and not sufficiently transmuted into the concrete forms of daily life".

author found in Erewhon, omitting no significant item. The reviewer is not convinced (not "converted to Erewhonianism") but he is impressed, as well as entertained. His final sentences are typical of his tone and attitude:

We shall not do the book the injustice of taking any more plums from it. It deserves a careful reading; and will probably find its way where a more sermon-like book would only repel. It shakes the dry bones of our moral and religious formulae, to some good purpose, let us hope. Not a few who will be drawn to the book for amusement only will find concealed under the mask of comedy not a little wholesome truth and wisdom.

The remaining reviews, with two exceptions,¹³ are variations of the Examiner treatment, and contain little that is either new or relevant to this study. The Pall Mall Gazette¹⁴ finds the book "clever and amusing" and comments on the effectiveness of showing the inhabitants of Erewhon as "more nearly [than those in The Coming Race] at

13 Vanity Fair (May 4) has as usual very little to say: "... Whatever one may think of the satire - and we have no space to review it - the book is extremely well written, the imaginative parts are fresh, the descriptions well painted, and the sentiment tasteful. ..." The Globe (May 20) is the most concisely disdainful of all twelve reviews. In its opinion, Erewhon is "a book apparently intended to sneer at grave moral and religious matters ... the best parts [of which] are not very wise, the worst extremely foolish", and its author "a very young man, who has not yet comprehended the things which he proposes to study", a man who may live to be "ashamed of this bantling".

14 May 10, 1872.

the same level of intelligence and civilization with ourselves, ... [not] in possession of any advanced scientific knowledge", so as to make the satire more direct. The anti-machine revolution,¹⁵ and the way in which "disease and crime ... have changed places", command most attention, and the educational system the least. The tone is friendly and tolerant. So is that of the Illustrated London News,¹⁶ which speaks of the "whimsical character of the book" as "rising to a higher degree of imaginative caprice in its account of the ... theory concerning the pre-existence of souls", and also of the "no small amount of shrewd suggestions upon questions of moral and social concern".

The last two reviews to appear, those in the Academy and the British Quarterly Review,¹⁷ while covering much the same ground, deliver two hard blows at the book. The Academy reviewer considers the invention slight, and finds that "those touches of definite imagination which give

15 "... he may be laughing at Mr. Darwin or having a joke at Luther."

16 May 18, 1872. The reviewer suspects "that the author, whoever he be, has at some time tended sheep in the upland districts of that colony [the Canterbury Province of New Zealand]"..

17 August 1 and July 1 respectively.

reality" are totally lacking; like the Athenaeum reviewer, he rather perversely suggests that the book is satisfactory until the author reaches Erewhon. After that the fiction is "so slight that, instead of stimulating interest, it overlays the satire with an irritating vagueness", and the writer's thinking is held up as "commonplace". It is "a dull book throughout". The British Quarterly (the voice of Congregationalism, and a regular reviewer of Hardy in later years) is harsher still: "the effect of the book is disappointing, where it is not unintelligible." The reviewer is left "at a loss to see the relevancy or meaning of many of the illustrations. Either they are simply unmeaning, or absolutely foolish." This note of ingenuousness continues throughout the review ("we cannot for the life of us lay hold of the clue that is to guide us through the tangle of his satire") alternating with one of confident assertion ("Religious belief has not much to fear from an assailant who writes so foolishly as this writer does about missions and dogma"). "Allegorical satire," the review begins, "can only be justified by success"; the rest of the review makes it clear that in the reviewer's opinion no such justification is possible for a writer who compares so unfavourably with

those who have succeeded.¹⁸

It is difficult to summarize the reaction to Erewhon for the book encountered a wide variety of prejudices and levels of tolerance. That it created a good deal of interest is plain, for most of the reviews are long and appeared soon after the book's publication; but it is also plain that no reviewer, however sympathetic, is able to subscribe to all of Butler's views, and that nobody is prepared to suggest that the book is a masterpiece. Butler's purpose was more to cause a stir, by expressing some strongly-held views, than to earn the applause of the critics, and any approbation he received must have come as a pleasant and unexpected bonus. The rebuffs, on the other hand, would doubtless have helped to confirm him in his views, and may have been an ingredient in the creation of Ernest Pontifex. Butler seems to have been capable of putting to good use the controversy he so deliberately provoked, and to have been able to do so from the beginning of his career. Hardy's experience is quite different, with his concern for what others thought, and the pain caused by his tackling controversial subjects at the end

18 Such as Swift or, for that matter, the author of The Coming Race, "which was almost worthy of Swift".

of a career whose beginning had been marked by a generally sympathetic admiration.

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ii. The Eustace Diamonds

Anthony Trollope stands even farther from Samuel Butler than Hardy does. His matter-of-fact attitude towards his profession places him at the other end of the spectrum, but this brings its rewards. Since he uses the novel for nothing other than the re-creation of the world about him, he does not encounter criticisms that his view is not "sufficiently transmuted into the concrete forms of daily life" as Butler did, nor are there complaints about being "taken farther from the madding crowd than ever". Trollope, however, had to face other strictures, especially toward the end of his career, when a too-long and too-frequent exposure to his public was beginning to have an adverse effect.

A Pair of Blue Eyes was Hardy's third published novel, The Eustace Diamonds, published in the same year,¹⁹ was Trollope's twenty-eighth; if one did not know this from the

19 The date on the title-page of The Eustace Diamonds is 1873, but it was in fact published on October 19, 1872.

reference books, one could easily surmise it from the reviews. The criticisms of the Hardy novel are lively with an underlying speculation about what his strong points are and what the future holds; those of Trollope's often seem to be struggling to find something new to say. Hugh Walpole, in an attempt to account for the vicissitudes in Trollope's reputation, makes a point that applies to The Eustace Diamonds, even though in 1872 Trollope has another ten years (and another nineteen novels) ahead of him:

... When a novelist publishes books steadily, year by year, over a very long period, both the critics and the general public take him, after a while, for granted. They know thoroughly his gifts, his tricks, the subjects that suit him, the subjects that don't suit him. "Ah, here is Mr. Smith again," they say, "with his annual novel. Even though he is writing this time about pirates rather than curates, we know that his pirates will turn out to be curates in the end." The critics have long ago said their say, and prefer to exercise their wits upon someone new and original.²⁰

That a decline in popularity had set in by 1872 and that it brought Trollope pain is beyond question:

But when this great public, who had for so long ... cherished him, showed signs of weariness, then indeed came melancholy. ... The early 'seventies brought him one popularity ... as great as any he had previously enjoyed; but he was too shrewd a judge of public feeling to be misled by a single triumph ... He

20 "Anthony Trollope" in The Great Victorians, London, n.d., p. 532.

realised that he was regarded as démodé; that he had become a survival from the 'sixties, too obviously a star-novelist of an earlier epoch for the impatient liking of a rising generation.²¹

This "single triumph" was The Eustace Diamonds.²² Several of the reviews are a curious blend of the tedium that comes from having to deal with an author whom one knows too well already and the excitement generated by an encounter with an unusually good book. The Daily News,²³ in a hostile review, suggests that "with the single exception of Lady Eustace readers of this novel will make no new acquaintances. The well-known Trollope troupe reappear ... they set methodically about loving each other, deceiving each other, gossiping, handing tea, and cutting bread and butter." The Athenæum,²⁴ straddling the fence, makes a similar point:

21 Michael Sadleir, Trollope, A Commentary, London, revised edition 1945, pp. 312-313.

22 Trollope himself wrote of it as follows (Autobiography, London, 1950, "Oxford Trollope" edition, p. 419): "At any rate the book was a success, and did much to repair the injury which I felt had come to my reputation in the novel-market by the works of the last few years. I doubt whether I had written anything so successful ... since The Small House of [sic] Allington. I had written what was much better ... but that is by no means the same thing."

23 November 12, 1872.

24 October 26, 1872.

"In a literary point of view, we think the present volumes will not diminish his reputation. His instrument is always the kaleidoscope, but this particular permutation of the old materials is effective enough." The Times²⁵ begins an enthusiastic review, "Mr. Trollope has builded the tower of his literary achievements yet three volumes higher; still it shows no signs of tottering, for these last bricks laid upon its high battlements are well-nigh as ample as those that bear the weight of the structure. The Eustace Diamonds may fearlessly invite comparison with any of Mr. Trollope's earliest and best known novels."

The Saturday Review,²⁶ in a notice of great perspicacity, takes the criticism of Trollope's professional longevity on to another plane, making a point that would be worthy of the most thorough and scholarly work of criticism:

Of all the gifts of the novelist we suppose the faculty of scene-making is most affected by time. The style maintains its vivacity, the dialogue gains in ease, the knowledge of men is enlarged by observation and study, the experience of life extends its range, the judgment matures and mellows; but there is in every mind only a certain class, we may almost say only a limited number, of forcible situations into which men and women may be brought.

25 October 30, 1872.

26 November 16, 1872.

After a time these repeat themselves, even with a fertile imagination, and we miss the absolute collision of mind with mind which, wherever we meet it, is the charm of fiction. In The Eustace Diamonds description very much takes the place of scenes, and talk of action. Each personage is introduced with an elaborate exhaustive character. We are told exactly what they are like, and what they are made of, and this is done with the pen of a master; but the scenes in which they act upon one another are few and far between.

Even the "one popularity" that the early 'seventies brought Trollope was not free from critical censure; the reception was a mixed one.²⁷ The reviewers in the Spectator²⁸ and the Daily News were united in finding the book distasteful; it appeared that for once in his career Trollope had forgotten his own dictum that a book must have characters with whom the reader can sympathize. For these two reviewers, there was no candidate for their sympathy:

27 Of the fourteen reviews I have been able to find, two are antagonistic and three others far from friendly, leaving only nine that are commendatory. This quantitative analysis would seem to indicate, however, that by and large the book could be regarded as a considerable success. The same conclusion may be derived from Trollope's celebrated table in his Autobiography in which he lists the income derived from his novels: seven of the twelve novels published between 1862 and 1869 had earned more than the £2500 he received from The Eustace Diamonds; only two of the other fourteen published after 1869 brought him more.

28 October 26, 1872.

It is a depressing story, in which all that is coarse and base is painted with lavish power, but where evil itself is not on a grand scale, and where the few good characters are so insignificant that you almost resent the author's expectation that you shall sorrow in their sorrows and rejoice in their joys.²⁹

Thus the principal characters of this story have an inconsequential, wavering identity, distinctly untrue to nature, and incapable of chaining the reader's attention.³⁰

But the shortage of attractive characters is by no means the chief criticism levelled at the novel: it has, for these reviewers, a much more serious blemish. "The aims depicted by this novel", writes the Daily News reviewer, "are low, mean, debased, sordid",³¹ and the Spectator concurs:

29 Spectator.

30 Daily News. The last point anticipates the criticism of the book by Bradford Booth (Anthony Trollope, Aspects of his Life and Art, London, 1959, pp. 90 ff.) that more important than characters with whom one can sympathize are "characters who are interesting", an ingredient he finds almost totally lacking in The Eustace Diamonds.

31 The Daily News is concerned even more with "the immorality of this book", which derives, in its opinion, to one single fault which the review elaborates at some length but which it summarizes boldly in a simple, self-righteous, sentence: "The characters do what pleases them, without a thought of what is right."

... we cannot doubt that the defect of the novel is its want of anything like moral contrasts, its horrors in the way of sordidness and coarseness without any adequate foils, the feeling it gives one that the meannesses, basenesses, and moral vulgarities of life, overshadow the heavens and shut out the sun.

It is useless, moreover, for the author to reply "that he paints the world as he finds it" for "the author has an aim beyond the mere looking-glass reproductions of nature. If he does not busy himself with what lies beneath the surface, he may find himself no better off than the dog with the shadow."³²

This last objection brings the reader to the heart of the matter, for the reviewer is making a fundamental miscalculation: in Trollope's case there was no aim beyond the "mere looking-glass reproductions of nature". Indeed this has been seen as his great fascination for generations of readers.³³ Hawthorne was expressing the thought of all of them when he wrote that Trollope's world

32 Daily News.

33 To take one assessment from many similar ones: "[He is] ... the most typical representative of the Victorian spirit, or - to adopt a term of European scope - of the Biedermeier spirit. All he proposed to himself was to look at the world honestly and to portray men exactly as they were, so that his readers should be able to recognize themselves in his books, and not feel that they had been transported amongst divinities and demons." Mario Praz, The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, London, 1956, p. 265.

is just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were being made a show of.³⁴

The reviewer in the Globe³⁵ in a much more prosaic way makes the point with equal power:

There are few people who perform better than Mr Trollope one of the greatest functions of a novelist - namely, the enabling us to enter amusing society by the mere act of turning over his pages. What an ungrateful world ours must be if it fail to recognise the benefit! Here there are absolutely no penalties to be paid for the pleasure; no trouble about dressing; no turning out from our own chimney-corner; no fears that we may be doomed to stand in tight boots in a crowd; no doubts whether we may not go down to dinner with the stupidest of partners ...

The reviewer is prepared to concede that most of the society in this new novel "is too sordid and mean to be attractive", but he recognizes that this is in a sense linked to Trollope's "steady conviction that the world of society rolls on much the same tomorrow whatever shocks it receives today ... [and that] it is partly to this treatment of events that Mr Trollope's stories owe their life-like reality." Other reviewers are even more straightforward in their praise:

34 A letter of February 11, 1860, quoted in Sadleir, p. 240.

35 November 7, 1872.

... on its own level, it must be for a while the rage of the libraries, and it will be a permanent favourite afterwards ... In common with the rest of his books, this last production ... lacks that absorbing interest which distinguishes many novels of the day; but thanks to the marvellous character sketching of such people as we meet every day in society one is content to read calmly and carefully, realising more and more as chapter follows chapter how excellent the novel is as a work of art ...³⁶

There was, however, something about The Eustace Diamonds that gave it the special appeal needed to lift it out of the general run of Trollopian Trollope, as Walpole calls it. Looking back on it, the author himself recognized what it was:

... The Eustace Diamonds achieved the success which it certainly did attain, not as a love-story, [37] but as a record of a cunning little woman of pseudo-fashion, to whom, in her cunning, there came a series of adventures, unpleasant enough in themselves, but pleasant to the reader.³⁸

Lizzie Eustace and her adventures are what made the novel "emphatically a book to be had from Mudie's with as little delay as possible."³⁹ It is all very well for the Spectator to protest how far Lizzie falls short of Becky Sharp (with whom Trollope had invited comparison), and to maintain that

36 Standard, October 28, 1872.

37 Although Trollope had had in mind that it would disprove that dictum that "a novelist after fifty should not write love-stories".

38 Autobiography, p. 344.

39 Standard.

she is "too utterly false to understand where her falsehood begins" and that, unlike Becky's cleverness, Lizzie's only "gets its owner constantly into trouble, not out of it";⁴⁰ the majority of reviewers find her captivating. Even the Guardian,⁴¹ which cannot recommend the book wholeheartedly, regards the portrait of this "fascinating and unprincipled young widow" as "admirably drawn ... an admirable instance of the patient skill with which the author balances the good and evil in his characters, and notes down their most minute indications".

For the Telegraph⁴² reviewer, Trollope had bestowed "most of the power" on Lizzie Eustace, "with a success which will assuredly be appreciated by his readers"; the Morning Post⁴³ goes further:

The delineation of the principal female character is wonderfully vivid and sustained, and it is perhaps the best tribute to the art of the author to say that while this person is always rendered odious, she nevertheless possesses curious fascination, which fully justifies the

40 The whole long comparison between the two adventuresses is an excellent example of the quality of Victorian reviewing at its most thorough. Booth (p. 92) makes the same comparison, but far less convincingly.

41 December 24, 1872.

42 December 5, 1872.

43 December 2, 1872.

singular influence which she exercises from time to time over persons, good, bad, and indifferent, who all in their several ways ought to have known better.

John Bull⁴⁴ remarks that "it is on the delineation of the heroine herself that Mr. Anthony Trollope lavishes the greatest skill", and this in a book in which he "has excelled himself"; similarly the Saturday ("Mr Trollope is himself again in The Eustace Diamonds") finds her "well drawn ... [she] stands out a distinct, strongly marked image and type, and will live among his characters." The Echo,⁴⁵ which can find little to say about this "tedious [yet] amusing" book, commits itself to the extent of suggesting that "the most carefully-drawn character, and that with which much pains have been taken, is Lady Eustace ... beautiful and intelligent, timid and bold, crafty and simple, wonderfully worldly-wise, and wonderfully silly ... fascinating and dangerous." There is no question but that the prevailing opinion of the day supports Sadleir's view of Lizzie - "a masterpiece of subtlety"⁴⁶ - rather than that of Booth who

44 November 16, 1872.

45 November 4, 1872.

46 Op. cit., p. 419.

complains of his "boredom with Lizzie and with the ragtag and bobtail of other shabby characters".⁴⁷

One of the shabbiest of these is Frank Greystock. It is noteworthy that, in spite of all Trollope's warnings, the readers of the day persist in looking for a hero, and, finding only Frank, complain that they have been let down. Expressions of dissatisfaction at the absence of a conventional type of hero in Trollope are frequent in these reviews, and give contemporary corroboration to Mario Praz's view⁴⁸ that "the abolition of the hero is a salient feature of Trollope". Trollope himself is honest and above-board: in the very book under review he includes an aside that gives one of his most straightforward statements of his point of view:

With whom are we to sympathize? says the reader, who not unnaturally imagines that a hero should be heroic. Oh, thou, my reader, whose sympathies are in touch with the great and only aim of my work, when you have called the dearest of your friends round you to your hospitable table, how many heroes are there sitting at board?⁴⁹

47 Op. cit., p. 92.

48 Op. cit., p. 267.

49 The Eustace Diamonds, London, 1930, World's Classics edition, p. 315. The beginning of Chapter XXXV is entirely taken up with this point.

This does not, however, prevent criticism. The Saturday finds Greystock very unsatisfactory:

... we do not find ourselves quarrelling with Lizzie as we do with the man whom, for want of a better one, we must call the hero of the story ... We can only suppose that Mr. Trollope was too busy with his heroine ... to know quite what he was about, or to realize the very contemptible figure which he has made his hero cut;

but the Examiner⁵⁰ is inclined to be more understanding, more tolerant in its view of a "yet more unheroic hero":

... persons, good-hearted and even generous, yet vacillating, and in the main very selfish, Mr. Trollope has already described in great numbers, but he always excels in this kind of portraiture, and Frank Greystock is equal to the best of his sort. ... and as long as such persons exist in real life - and when will they cease to exist? - they can hardly be laughed at too often, especially with such kindly laughter as Mr. Trollope knows exactly how to arouse.⁵¹

Other reviews do not concern themselves with Greystock at such length, but none of them has much good to say about him. The Spectator brings him into its sweeping condemnation of the book:

50 November 16, 1872.

51 How close this comes to Sadleir's generalizations: "At heart he was of all men the most tolerant of others' failings; and of that tolerance his books are full ... towards most of the lapses that a conventional society condemned he shows a humorous sympathy ..." (Op. cit., p. 132) and "His patience with most individual shortcomings was inexhaustible" (Ibid., p. 154).

... Mr Trollope keeps painting this sort of infidelity of heart till he almost loses the sense of what it means ... yet he has never described it with so little moral discrimination as in this book. Frank Greystock is a falling-off on his familiar double-minded hero ... [He] does not relieve the sense of the ignoble which so powerfully pervades this story.

It is interesting to see how virtually every critical comment on The Eustace Diamonds made in recent books about Trollope finds a direct counterpart in contemporary reviews. This bears out, perhaps, the view that Trollope was "the supremely faithful mirror of the Victorian age"⁵² and helps to account for the fact that Trollope and "his unruffled and benevolently realistic estimate of human emotions, so full of shades and subtleties"⁵³ have come back into fashion in our own day: we seem to see him as his contemporaries did. Even so small a critical judgment as Booth's preference for Lord Fawn among the characterizations in the book is shared by several reviewers: "One of the best-drawn characters in the book is that of Lord Fawn, and it is saying great things for Mr Trollope's powers of drawing when it can be declared that he has done one of the most difficult things in the world - he has made a respectable man interesting."⁵⁴

52. Mario Praz, p. 261.

53. Ibid.

54. Times.

A more important example of Trollope's contemporaries' anticipating a modern view is their enthusiasm for the plot of The Eustace Diamonds, an enthusiasm most strongly expressed in recent times by Michael Sadleir.⁵⁵ There are some reviews that do not refer to it, and two see it as no better than Trollope's customary performance,⁵⁶ but several draw attention to his skill, the Globe in particular singling it out for praise:

It is impossible to leave "The Eustace Diamonds" without noticing the cleverness of the plot. Perhaps no former novel from the author's hand has displayed equal skill and ingenuity in composition;

while the Times becomes almost lyrical:

Another "love problem" runs parallel to Lady Eustace's brilliant history, almost from its opening chapters. Here Mr. Trollope's skill and triumph as a literary charioteer is conspicuously shown. He manages his two teams with perfect ease, and they run along side by side, without ever becoming entangled in each other's paths, although, of necessity, these paths cross from time to time.

John Bull feels strongly enough about the matter to issue a warning to its readers:

Woe betide the reader who skips even one page; for, though the plot is too skilful to be called

55 In his introduction to the "Oxford Trollope" edition (London, 1950) he describes it as, for Trollope, "fabulous", I, ix.

56 "... another instance of Mr Trollope's inability or unwillingness to construct a plot which will not prove too slender to support the weight of a three-volume novel" - Guardian.

complicated, it is so artistically constructed, and has so many wheels within wheels, that it requires concentrated attention, which, however, is eagerly yielded, owing to the absorbing interest of the story.

The fact is, however, that The Eustace Diamonds was in large measure exceptional in its plotting; in most of his other novels, as Hugh Sykes Davies points out, there is a "disregard for plot. It would, indeed, have been incompatible with his choice of the middle range of characters to have involved them in sensational and complicated situations: ordinary people commonly lead ordinary lives."⁵⁷ This generalization too finds expression among the reviews of 1872: the writer in the Guardian, in a generally unfavourable review, accounts for Trollope's following in this way:

The great charm of his writings is just in that which, it has been said, would lend an interest to the biography of the most common-place of lives, the simplicity and reality with which his characters display their real nature as the tale goes on ... Few men and women have ever gone through the startling adventures which befall the heroes or heroines of most novels; equally as few perhaps attain to years of discretion without some embarrassments, and difficulties, and disappointments connected with an impossible love affair or an indiscreet engagement. The ground he occupies is just that frontier ground between good and evil, between reasonable discretion and cowardly falsehood, on which most people are conscious that their feet have stood at some crisis or other of their lives, in whichever direction their steps have tended afterwards.

57 Trollope, London, 1960, p. 15.

One of the impressive features of a study of these notices of The Eustace Diamonds is that they are so Trollopian: almost all of them are good-humoured and open-minded, expressing pleasure at having an opportunity simply to look at a slice of life, even if, in this instance, it is a little highly-coloured. There is, moreover, as there should be - as there would be in "real life" - a wide range of differences of opinion within these fourteen reviews: some like Lucy Morris and others do not; some commend the portraits of the lawyers, another thinks Trollope is, as usual, weak in this department; many write with great enthusiasm about the author's pre-eminence as a describer of hunting-scenes while some ignore the point altogether; all of them agree that there are some incomparably good minor figures, but there is little agreement as to which they are. It is, indeed, as if the fourteen reviewers were describing their reactions to a dull week in the country in the company of a score or two of members of "society",⁵⁸ and that is, surely, the kind of unconscious compliment that Trollope would have found most touching.

58 This reaction, if I am correct, would bear out a point made by Asa Briggs in his essay on Trollope and Bagehot in Victorian People (London, 1954, p. 122): "The very 'dullness' of mid-Victorian England was what both of them loved, for never were two men more at home in their age. ... Trollope proved that it could have an enlivening quality if it were given fictional form. It was English as nothing else was: 'dullness is our line, as cleverness is that of the French. Woe to the English people if they ever forget that.'"

Sykes Davies asserts that Henry James spoke for his generation in his assessment of Trollope:

Henry James's phrase succinctly comprehends the whole contemporary impression: 'His great, his inestimable, merit was a complete appreciation of the usual.' The judgment is the more weighty, because a writer's contemporaries very rarely mistake the nature of his merit ...⁵⁹

An examination of this small segment of contemporary reaction suggests that his assertion is well-founded.

Trollope's "kindly but ironic perception of the gap between what we are, and what we ought to be, wish to be, or believe ourselves to be"⁶⁰ was never, it seems, more fully appreciated than by the immediate audience for whom he wrote.

* * * * *

iii. Daniel Deronda

In a study such as this, which attempts to place the criticism of Hardy's novels in a larger context as well as to trace the rise of his own reputation, the omission of a section on George Eliot would be unthinkable. With the death of Dickens in 1870, her right to be regarded as the

⁵⁹ Op. cit., p. 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

foremost novelist of the day was unassailable, nor was it ever the least in dispute during the remaining ten years of her life. It is this very pre-eminence, however, that leads to a difficulty, in that justice must be done to her work (and to its effect upon the reviewers) without at the same time creating a serious imbalance in this study as a whole. If the reception of Daniel Deronda were described and summarized with the thoroughness applied to the other fifteen novels, this section could occupy a hundred pages. Not only is the quantity of criticism of a different order of magnitude,⁶¹ but Daniel Deronda provoked at the time of its publication feelings of perplexity that have surrounded it ever since and that make an analysis of criticism of the book peculiarly difficult.

In an attempt to solve the dilemma, this section will differ from all the others in three respects: it will not

61 I have found twenty-two reviews, almost all of which are exceptionally long. Two of the serious journals gave it two notices (these four items alone amounting to approximately 10,000 words) while the quarterlies that reviewed it, the Edinburgh Review, the British Quarterly Review, and the Contemporary, devoted to it twenty-eight, twenty, and twenty-one pages respectively. It should also be noted that, as many journals had followed the publication of the novel part by part and had commented on the events of the plot in these monthly reviews, very few of the reviews of the book edition give even one sentence to summary of the plot, using all their space for analysis and criticism. What is more, the reviewers can take for granted in their readers a knowledge of George Eliot's earlier books, and comparisons and references are numerous as a result.

refer to current assessments either of the author, or of the particular work under discussion;⁶² it will avoid reproducing both petty cavils and glib compliments and will concentrate instead on the broader issues that either united or separated the novelist and her critics and that, occasionally, divided the critics among themselves.

The opening of the Globe⁶³ review establishes at once that "Everybody who reads English fiction at all may now be assumed to have read 'Daniel Deronda', except for some few who ... have waited ... until they can read the entire book at once." This certainty, this taking for granted a recent reading of the book, is universal. No reviewer sees his task as that of recommending the book to his readers; each assumes that what is called for is a commentary, or a summing-up. Several of the reviewers take the opportunity to express an opinion of George Eliot's place in English fiction, and most of them try to place Daniel Deronda in the context of her writings as a whole.

62 It may be pertinent to note, however, that the assessments of Daniel Deronda that proved most useful to me were those by Joan Bennett (in George Eliot, London, 1948), Walter Allen (in George Eliot, 1965), and F. R. Leavis (in the preface to the Harper Torchbook edition of the novel).

63 September 12, 1876.

It is something similar to the reception that greets a new serious novel by, for example, Graham Greene, but on an immensely grander scale.

That George Eliot is in a class of her own for these reviewers is beyond question: the only comparisons that are made are with Scott or Shakespeare or her own previous work,⁶⁴ and it is acknowledged explicitly by the British Quarterly⁶⁵ (though it is everywhere "understood") that

in criticising 'Daniel Deronda' ... we must be understood to use the ordinary epithets of admiration in a totally different sense from that which they must bear in the critiques of the current fiction of the day. In the strictest sense of the word her books are English classics.

It is with statements such as this in mind that the modern reader much approach the Hardy reviews, and it is in the context that they provide that he must see phrases such as

64 I was struck by a sentence in Walter Allen's book (op. cit., p. 184): "Yet, though the comparison with Tolstoy and the praise it implies are just, it needs great qualification if it is to make complete sense. One may compare George Eliot to Tolstoy - one would never dream of comparing Tolstoy to George Eliot ..." The same principle clearly applied in the minds of the reviewers of 1876 vis-a-vis George Eliot and Hardy: he may be compared to her on scores of occasions, but that she should, even in a detail, be compared to him seems not to have entered anyone's head.

65 October 1876, p. 478.

"he has ... established his right to rank as a master of prose fiction".⁶⁶

When the Globe review goes on to say, "that the book has caused a certain amount of disappointment is undeniable", it is very graciously but drastically understating the case, for only a handful of reviewers gave the book a sympathetic notice. On the other side were the many who turned their disappointment into head-shaking chiding or, in two or three cases, indignant reproof.

For some it is the general impression of the book that leaves them discontented:

It is not the parts of the story, but the story itself as a whole, with which fault has to be found. It is dull and disappointing, in spite of the surprisingly good scenes in it. There is a want of proportion, of harmony of the parts which leaves on the mind a lasting sense of incompleteness and inadequacy.⁶⁷

... the fact is that the reader never ... feels at home. The author is ever driving at something foreign to his habits of thought.⁶⁸

66 A quotation from the Graphic review of Far from the Madding Crowd. It should be noted, on the other hand, that it was the British Quarterly that described that same novel as "the cleverest and strongest since 'Middlemarch'."

67 Observer, September 3, 1876.

68 Saturday Review, September 16, 1876.

Others object to the fact that in this new book George Eliot has not avoided her customary faults. George Saintsbury in the Academy⁶⁹ lists those that "should be by this time pretty well known to the student of English letters":

a tendency to talk about personages instead of allowing them to develop themselves, a somewhat lavish profusion of sententious utterance, a preference for technical terms in lieu of the common dialect which is the fitter language of the novelist, and a proneness to rank debateable positions and one-sided points of view among the truths to which it is safe to demand universal assent.

Confusing the issue throughout is the faction that regrets that George Eliot ever departed from the style of Adam Bede and the other early novels:

through all the varied keys of criticism ... there is a very perceptible dominant note of disapproval at her apparent determination to adhere to what may be called her second style.⁷⁰

Their disappointment is a double one, for not only are they conscious of her faults but they see less in the way of

69 September 9, 1876.

70 John Bull, September 16, 1876. The Saturday Review tries to soften the blow, as it were, by suggesting to the devotees of Adam Bede and Silas Marner that "no experience holds inexhaustible examples of mother wit and wisdom, of quaint rustic ignorance and cunning, of strong prejudice which has never felt the breath of cultivated opinion" but it is clear that some reviewers cannot reconcile themselves to the loss.

compensation; the great quality of "spontaneity" has disappeared, and with it the better part of her most admired characteristics - "striking originality of thought, caustic humour, and a remarkable gift for terse and brilliant epigram".⁷⁰

The faults catalogued by Saintsbury are taken up individually by various other reviewers. Undoubtedly first among the imperfections is the way in which too few of the leading characters "come aliye". One reviewer⁷¹ accounts for this by the observation that "the dramatic element is small ... and the descriptive large ... [The characters'] feelings, motives, wishes, are subjected to a subtle - shall we venture to say sometimes a wearisome - analysis, which covers whole pages, and leaves little room for the display of these feelings in action"⁷² The chief casualty, for almost every reviewer, is *Deronda* himself: not only is he "altogether vague, shadowy, and unreal",⁷² - in spite of

71 Guardian, October 4, 1876.

72 The Saturday Review, II, September 23, 1876, acknowledges that "to trace the causes of things to their root is a fascinating pursuit and one which the reader ... willingly joins in", but warns that this is true only "if his interests are not more keenly engaged elsewhere".

his having "borne such a weight of commentary"⁷³ - but because of this the whole work is in danger of being thrown out of kilter:

Daniel Deronda, apart from the Hebrew question, is nobody at all; and the story without Daniel Deronda would lack all unity.⁷⁴

Most of those reviewers who do find Deronda substantial enough to come to grips with do not much like what they find:

... the character of Daniel Deronda approaches, as nearly as its inventor's genius permits to be possible, to a complete failure. ... Deronda, if the truth must be bluntly told, only misses something of the full odium of a prig by missing something of the full reality of a living being. ... In but one trait alone - his slight jealousy of Hans Meyrick - does Daniel Deronda show a redeeming human weakness; in all the rest he is a "faultless monster" ... [yet in his dealings with Gwendolen] he has to content himself with prescribing a sort of ethical Holloway's pill which would be good for any moral disease.⁷⁵

The blameless young man of faultless feature ... who never does a wicked thing, and never says one that is not priggish - is a person so intolerably dreadful that we not only dislike, but refuse to admit him as possible.⁷⁶

The imbalance is made worse by the general tendency of the reviewers to find Mordecai and Mirah ever more elusive or

73 Graphic, September 16, 1876.

74 Observer.

75 Pall Mall Gazette, I, September 30, 1876.

76 Academy.

unattractive, and thus to make the Deronda half of the book (to follow the Leavis division) all the less able to compete with Gwendolen Harleth for approbation.⁷⁷ "Mirah", according to the Saturday Review, II, "wants reality and never attains the status of a character"; the Observer goes further, "Daniel Deronda himself leaves little or no impression on the mind; Mirah absolutely none at all"; Mordecai is seen by the Spectator⁷⁸ as "rather a fine torso than a perfectly conceived and sculptured figure", while the Academy classes him with figures who are "no doubt, interesting historically,

[who] throw light on the character and aspirations of a curious people, and supply an admirable subject for a scientific monograph. But [who] for all this are not the stuff of which the main interest, or even a prominent interest, or anything but a very carefully reduced side interest, of prose novels should be wrought.⁷⁹

77 The Pall Mall Gazette says of Deronda and Mordecai: "[They] are failures of that precise kind which are begotten of too much reflection coupled with too little imagination. They are studies of abstract qualities ... Never before has the author drawn two such lifeless portraits."

78 September 9, 1876.

79 It should be noted, however, that Saintsbury goes on to pay tribute to the portrait of Mordecai in these terms: "this dissatisfaction with the manner and scale of his appearances does not blind us to the skill applied in the construction of Mordecai. Probably no other living writer is capable of the patient care with which these intricate and unfamiliar paths are followed ... If the things was to be done ... assuredly it could not have been done with greater cunning of analysis or in a manner more suggestive."

There are occasional reviews that redress the balance in this particular, the most striking of which is the Examiner's,⁸⁰ where Deronda is described as follows:

[He] is ... an example to the young man of the period, in the gravity and loftiness of his aims. Our flippant youth would probably call him a visionary or a prig, and would jeer at his relations with Gwendolen as impossible ... His grave meditative nature, his profound composure and self-control, his steady persistent passion, are eminently Hebraic, and are meant to be so. He is an illustration of an element in our complex national life ... to which, in our earnest moments, we are not incapable of yielding ourselves, and with the healthiest of results.

This would, presumably, have been a very gratifying criticism for George Eliot to have had passed on to her, especially since, as the Saturday Review pointed out,

it has evidently been a labour of love to apply her special talents to the embodiment of cherished ideals in an external form; to dramatize them, as it were, and make them speak for themselves, through the person and actions of her hero ...

Deronda is given the most sympathetic treatment by the British Quarterly, which provides a balanced point of view on the matter:

The setting in which we find Deronda's character may appear unnatural; we may grumble a little at the surface sheen of priggishness which it wears; we may feel a sense of mistiness or artificiality

⁸⁰ September 2, 1876.

in the enthusiasm which comes to stir him; but there can be no doubt as to the grandeur of the moral foundations on which that character is built, [nor as] to the depth and subtlety of the analysis in which its development is traced.

The Dublin Review,⁸¹ in a short sentence, may well have described the cause of many reviewers' dissatisfaction: "Contrary to prevailing fashion, which does not acknowledge heroes, the central figure of the book is meant for a hero of a now-forgotten type."

What is overwhelmingly clear from the reviews, however, is that, then as now, it is the Gwendolen Harleth novel that has the greater appeal:

Whatever may have been [George Eliot's] intention in the matter, we imagine that with ninety-nine readers out of a hundred, it is Gwendolen's story which will form the main interest of the novel.⁸²

or as the Guardian more bluntly put it = "when we have discussed Gwendolen, we have discussed the book." The reason given for this popularity differs from critic to critic: for one it may be the dynamism that comes from seeing Gwendolen and Deronda as "perfect moral antitheses";⁸² for another it is "the central story of Gwendolen Harleth's soul"⁸³ that

81 April 1877.

82 Echo, September 13, 1876.

83 Globe.

counts for most. The Globe's review is one of the most commendatory, and has at its core a most perceptive analysis of Gwendolen - one that recalls Walter Allen's contention that in this part of the novel "action derives solely from character ... Character is destiny, and implicit in Gwendolen's is both her hubris and her nemesis":⁸⁴

Of course the full interest of the novel ends, as it began, with Gwendolen. All else is subordinate to her, not only in our own hearts, but in the mind of the author. The girl with the serpent's beauty has amply redeemed her promise by developing into one of the most complete and most harmonious creations, consistent in her very inconsistencies and harmonious in her very discords, that George Eliot has ever called into being ... change is managed so naturally and gradually, ... that we are as unaware of the seeming magic as in watching the daily growth of a child into a woman. It is only in looking back ... that we are able to realise the art that has been so consummately concealed.

Even Saintsbury, who finds so little to praise in the book, considers her "an overwhelming success: and the minutest and least friendly examination will hardly discover a false note or a dropped stitch"; and he goes on to suggest that

an additional interest is imparted by the discovery that Gwendolen is at heart a counterfoil of Dorothea, animated by an undisciplined egotism instead of an undisciplined altruism, and by the fanaticism of enjoyment instead of the fanaticism of sympathy.

84 Op. cit., p. 167.

She is "quite equal to anything that has been produced before"⁸⁵ "more within the range of our sympathies"⁸⁶ and "a warning to the girl of the period";⁸⁷ and this in spite of the fact that "never did novelist present the reader with a heroine so little attractive ... so selfish, so dead to duty and tenderness, so confident and unscrupulous."⁸⁸

The Spectator, arguing as it does that this is an essentially religious book, takes as the central theme of its review "the central story of Gwendolen Harleth's soul":⁸⁹

The struggle between evil and good for Gwendolen, her fear of the loneliness and vastness of the universe ... and the selfish plunge into ... marriage; the counteracting influence for good which Deronda gains with her ... and that disposal of events which always brings her within

86 Morning Post, October 17, 1876.

87 Examiner.

88 Saturday Review, I, which sees Gwendolen as filling the place that Rosamond has in Middlemarch. The Examiner also recalls the previous work, suggesting that "the danger which sometimes attends calculating selfishness" might be seen as an antidote to "the discomfiture of the unworldly aspirations of Dorothea", and contrasts Casaubon's failure with Mordecai's success.

89 What the Graphic calls "the picture of her gradual rise to a higher life through the very horror of the capacity for wickedness she discerns in herself ... a fine study in the spiritual life, impressing us as being as true as it must be exceptional."

reach of Deronda's influence when she most needs it ... all this is told with a power and a confidence in the overshadowing of human lives by a higher control which is the essence of the art of the story, and essentially religious.

Even the Dublin Review, while acknowledging that "George Eliot, alas, is no Catholic", can still consider that "it was a noble enterprise to describe for us the awakening of a conscience."⁹⁰

There are those who find Gwendolen's submission to Grandcourt hard to believe, and others who object to the thoroughness of what the Examiner calls "the skilful dissection of Gwendolen's heartlessness";⁹¹ but still others make a point of admiring the smoothness of the transition from Gwendolen Harleth to Gwendolen Grandcourt and the way in which so much of her is made known by the author. There is a similar lack of unanimity about Grandcourt: the British Quarterly considers him a finished study, remarkable for the consistency of his outlook and, at the same time, for "the underlying irony by which the utter contemptibleness of

90: "Nothing is so terrible as to look upon a soul, but nothing is more necessary if we would learn things as they are; and we have in these pages the features of the soul revealed in part as only a master-spirit could reveal them."

91 The Examiner itself seems to have mixed feelings about being "present at a lecture in social pathology" although it is ready to "look on, peep in our turn through the [microscope], and admire the skill of the anatomist as she flourishes her keen knife."

his blind self-love is shown in contrast with the thin veneer of surface sway which that self-love is able to achieve"; but the Guardian describes him as "a totally unnatural conception" because

The love of power does not cling in that steady and predominating way to a listless and self-indulgent nature ...

The stronger tendency, however, is to regard him as a major success, the Morning Post and the Academy being the most elaborate in their praise:

to describe the portrait of Mr. Grandcourt demands almost the language of hyperbole. Considered as a psychological study it is perhaps the best thing in the novel ... [He] is simply a cold-blooded man, whose main idea is the gratification of self ... he is one of those people ... who are innately cruel ... It is a positive relief when this nightmare of a man manages to drown himself.

The husband is almost equally admirable; indeed one's admiration is here increased by the perception that the hand which is so faithful is distinctly unfriendly, and that the author would like us to detest Grandcourt. Yet there is not the slightest exaggeration in the portrait.

There is no important disagreement about the minor characters, among whom Sir Hugo Mallinger and the musician Klesmer are the most highly regarded. Most reviewers believe that they are not created with the same vigour and success as those in the other novels, and only the Examiner is so eccentric as to suggest that "by far the most wonderful part

of 'Daniel Deronda', its chief claim to admiration as an achievement, is its picture of the Jews, its exemplification and analysis of different forms of Jewish life ..."

The criticism of George Eliot's style is not as widespread as that of her characters and choice of subject-matter. The writer in John Bull draws attention to the "elaboration of language" and complains that "many of the sentences require to be read three or four times before their meaning is evident", but he goes no further than that. The Academy, on the other hand, devotes a long paragraph to "the singular way in which the characters are incessantly pushed back in order that the author may talk ..." and to the "kind of language [in which] these parabases or excursus are expressed"; the Pall Mall Gazette also writes at great length in support of its contention that "the language is no longer perfectly transparent to the thought". The World⁹² once more mounts its attack upon "the grave and growing deterioration of style":

[She] strains the English language and tires the patience of her readers to secure a certain philosophical impressiveness of phrase ... She conceals what are, or what seem like, the merest platitudes and commonplaces in this scientific disguise; and while the reader is struggling to discover the hidden

92 September 6, 1876.

pearl of wisdom it suddenly flashes upon him that what he had supposed was profundity is really puzzlement.⁹³

The Saturday Review is scarcely less kind in asserting that, in places, "all is obscure and meaningless to such attention as the reader cares to bestow. The puzzle can be cleared up ... but when one does get at the matter, probably it is so remote from one's sympathy as to be still an unintelligible language." From there it goes on to end its second notice with a question it leaves unanswered:

Considering that Daniel Deronda is so intensely improving all the way through, "What lesson", we have heard it asked, "does it teach?"

Several reviewers provide explicit statements which might serve as answers, especially in the light of the British Quarterly Review's generalizations that she is concerned always with the "solution of problems" that lie "at the very foundation of our social life", and that the reader will find in Daniel Deronda "a moral teaching which, within

93 The World does admit, nevertheless, that "there are deep moral lessons to be learned from [the book]; that Gwendolen Harleth is a terrible warning to thoughtless young ladies; that Daniel himself is a sublime illustration of the responsibility of human life.

its own range, is of the very highest, and a spiritual insight which, within the possibilities of mere human vision, is of the very deepest." The Echo suggests that

Her design ... is to proclaim throughout the book, as forcibly and impressively as she can, the rightful supremacy of the common duties and ties which link man to man.

and the Graphic, starting from the same interpretation, continues:

... to despise or outrage these ties for the sake of advantage to self is to hurt the soul, and the penalty for the offence will surely have to be paid. For these ties and duties which bind us to people ... are the expression of something stronger than ourselves, "with deeper, farther-spreading roots, knit into the foundations of sacredness for all men".

Many others note in passing how concerned George Eliot has often been with considerations of kinship or loyalty to the race, and Saintsbury, observing that this forms an important theme in five other novels, wonders whether "the motive has ... depth and volume enough to bear such constant application".

Other reviewers have less exalted views of what the aim of the book is; the Guardian, for example - presumably forgetting the Jewish history altogether - asserts that Daniel Deronda is

the picture of a soul, shut up at first in its own selfishness and gradually struggling into a higher life through the sharp teachings of adversity.

and the Examiner generalizes this view into the suggestion that the "ruling intention" of the book is "a protest against low, sordid, personal aims; an incentive to a higher, worthier, more aspiring and humane life". This in turn becomes further amplified in the Spectator into the following piece of wishful thinking:

... no book of hers before this has breathed so distinctly religious a tone, so much faith in the power which overrules men's destinies for purposes infinitely raised above the motives which actually animate them, and which uses the rebellion, and the self-will, and the petty craft of human unworthiness, only to perfect the execution of His higher ends, and to hasten His day of deliverance.

That the book is meant to 'teach' is never questioned; it is as though everyone subscribes to the view of the Pall Mall Gazette that George Eliot may be looked to "for a sort of intellectual sustenance and moral enlightenment which they can get in no such plenty and perfection elsewhere." What has happened in Daniel Deronda, indeed, is that more than usual "the artist's hand is ... inspired and controlled by the spirit of the preacher",⁹⁴ and that this

fact "is the cause at once of the book's strength and of its weakness". The Graphic makes a similar point in its attempt to explain that

the disappointment which has been generally felt concerning "Daniel Deronda" has in great measure arisen from not understanding the author's attitude and design. ... George Eliot the great artist is here distinctly subordinate to George Eliot the moralist. She has a doctrine to proclaim; and the characters and incidents of her story seem to have been selected, arranged, and developed almost with a single eye to the better enunciation and enforcement of this doctrine.

Connected with the desire to teach, with the choice of Gwendolen's development for the mainspring of half the novel, with its setting in a world quite different from that of almost all her previous work, with all, indeed, that leads Walter Allen to call the book her "only quite modern novel" - connected with all of this is the arranging of the plot. A few reviewers praise her skill, but it is clear that they are struck merely by the neatness with which the incidents in the various stories interlock (nobody finds this part of the work as shaky and contrived as do present-day readers), and this is not the aspect of the novel that the reviewers in the Morning Post or the Pall Mall Gazette or John Bull have in mind when they complain. Their concern, although they do not of course express it in these terms, is that the reader is having to work at the story, to bring his

intelligence into play so as to follow suggestions, take up hints, and fit pieces together for himself. When confronted with this, the Pall Mall Gazette⁹⁵ can only grumble that "almost for the first time in reading George Eliot we are made to feel, as inferior writers so often make us feel, as if some important chapter had slipped out of the manuscript", while John Bull goes on to complain about George Eliot's "second style" for similar reasons:

... the story, as a story, is not interesting. It wants a climax, and it leaves the impression of desultoriness which such stories always do leave ... as in "Middlemarch", we move from one set of characters to another, more or less interested in all, but conscious all the time of the slight and insufficient connection each has with the other.

It will be seen that Daniel Deronda failed to satisfy on many scores, and that it left many, if not most, of the reviewers discontented and puzzled: some of the abuse it provoked is different in degree from anything that would be written about the book now - it is the kind that is associated with the spitefulness of a child who has had his dreams crushed, or a lover who has been disillusioned. The

95 Its patronizing, point-missing, reviews, mixtures of praise and blame thoughtlessly applied, must have been more provoking than much more hostile ones, and were presumably kept from the author by Lewes's acting as her critical filter.

following excerpts from the Guardian, the Observer and the Pall Mall Gazette illustrate the depth of the disappointment:

It may be that George Eliot is in her decadence, and that she has exhausted the spontaneous fountain of fresh thought and flowing phrase, and has to spur a jaded brain into compulsory activity ... One can only regret that her powers should be so often expended on offensive subjects and wasted in elaborating effects which are uselessly disagreeable.

We have read religiously every word of it, but we have never yet sate in a room where others were reading it without discovering that they were skipping page after page. Nor were these persons by any means of the frivolous sort of intellect ... the book "bored" them. It is no good attempting to reply that the fault was theirs. The fault could not well be theirs. A novel has no right to bore professed novel-readers.

... till she once more begins to imagine her characters, and not merely to "suppose" them and then reason concerning them, we shall not again, we fear, have another "Adam Bede", or a second "Silas Marner". The loss therefrom to the world would be great, and that must be our excuse for plain speaking. George Eliot should leave to others the scientific teaching which scores of her contemporaries can undertake as well and better than herself, and confine herself to that work in which no one is fitted to take her place. It would be a grievous pity that the world should be deprived of a consummate novelist only to get a second-rate savant in exchange.

Not all the reviews were abusive, and while no critic was prepared to claim that Daniel Deronda was her masterwork,⁹⁶

96 . Which is hardly surprising.

several came to its defence. The Spectator thought that Book VII contained "perhaps the highest work George Eliot has ever given us", and ended its review with a sentence that would certainly find favour by any present critical standard:

Daniel Deronda ... seems to us much more unequal than Middlemarch. But it rises at certain points definitely above that great book. Its summits are higher, but its average level of power is very much lower.

The Examiner told its readers that it was "much more disposed to admire the stupendous genius of the work than to regret the absence of any of the qualities of the novelist", and the Dublin Review thought that the Gwendolen Harleth part of the book was written with such "exceeding tenderness and delicacy" that "whatever becomes of the remainder of the book, we anticipate for this part an almost immortality of fame."

The Globe, in some respects the most sympathetic of all the reviews, encouraged its readers to forget their disappointment and to look on the book as

a profound and subtle study of a difficult aspect of human nature, inferior to none [of her previous work], and, as a work of purely creative fancy and imagination, perhaps superior to all. If it be less generally attractive at once, that is because it deals with matters which are not the less real or

the less worth caring about because they are outside the limits of our common experience. We need fresh air as often as we can obtain it, and none of these things are beyond the range of our sympathies.

A summary of the reaction to Daniel Deronda would be incomplete without reference to the three lengthiest reviews the book received - Edward Dowden's essay in the Contemporary,⁹⁷ the anonymous article in the Edinburgh,⁹⁸ and Sidney Colvin's appraisal in the Fortnightly.⁹⁹ It would be inappropriate to allow them to occupy the space they would demand in any full-scale study of George Eliot's fame, but the spirit of all of them should be caught, for they all demonstrate (but particularly the Contemporary and Edinburgh reviews) how high feelings ran in the world of letters over the book and the way in which it was received. The Edinburgh self-righteously assumes the role of the elder statesman, the one upon whom it is incumbent to express the view of those who are not too over-awed to speak out. It begins by tracing her "remarkable career", one in which "the critics only at best preceded the public by a single step"

97 February 1877.

98 October 1876. Neither of these reviews is quoted in Lerner and Holmstrom's recent "Selection of Contemporary Reviews", George Eliot and Her Readers, London, 1966.

99 November 1876.

and which has won for her "a more unanimous and a more enthusiastic verdict" than that accorded to almost any other "competitor for the prizes of literature". But this has brought her to a dangerous position:

Her insight, her wisdom, her power, her tenderness, her knowledge of human nature, have scarcely ever been called in question, and at length the very critics who have helped to make it have grown timid before her universal fame ... the boldest has held his breath when venturing to express a faint and timid disagreement ... To have reached to this height of popular esteem is in itself a great and very unusual attainment. Scott did it in his day: but even the reputation of Scott was perhaps less dazzling ...

After acknowledging that "a fame more thoroughly deserved has seldom existed", and spending several pages in delineating, with examples from the early novels, the qualities that justify her reputation, the Edinburgh reviewer comes to the work in hand:

Never certainly since the days of Scott has any new work of fiction attracted the same amount of attention ... [keeping] the country agog for so many months, and [causing] so much general excitement and interest.

In spite of "the cumulative force of enthusiasm" and against the tide of "repeated and ever-increasing plaudits", the reviewer has to declare an adverse judgement:

This book, which we have all received with a respect which Shakespeare himself could scarcely equal, is, it is impossible to conceal from ourselves, a disappointment, even a failure. We say

it with bated breath: yet there can be little doubt that both in public and in private this conviction, growing less timid as it discovers itself to be general, is very widely felt. It fails in interest, in construction, in creative power, and, above all, it fails in that power of expression for which the author has been so justly famed.

Each point is taken up in turn, and everywhere the author is found wanting:

is it possible ... to regard without a certain fury the enthusiastic mob of readers which has cheered on its literary idol into pretences of impossible wisdom and refinements of moral learning too elaborate to be consistent either with nature or with art;

the extremely careful analysis of Gwendolen¹⁰⁰ in the early parts of the book leads only to further disappointment:

That all this elaborate preparation should end in the commonplace wretchedness of mere domestic incompatibility ... is an anti-climax of a most unexpected description, a disappointment quite unlooked for. Grandcourt and Gwendolen fall alike from the position they have hitherto held ... Never was there a more strange transformation;

and with a string of clever and cutting phrases¹⁰¹ the reviewer comes to the best that can be said:

100 "Gwendolen is not the kind of person to whom love is necessary", and a long passage on "her shrinking from all external signs of love-making" etc.

101 "It is not, however, virtue in the abstract that moves Gwendolen, but rather that abstract of all virtues, Daniel Deronda ..." "He is a kind of Hamlet without a grievance ..."

Had she been the type which is repellent to George Eliot's mind, there is nothing in the way of passion or guilt to which we might not have hoped to see Gwendolen attain ... [but] she has resolved upon the moral reformation of her heroine, and from the moment that we fully discover this fact our hopes die painfully out ...

Strangely unsatisfactory, however, as is the development of Gwendolen, it is in her that the interest of the story lies. Wherever we encounter her our failing attention quickens. The other half of the book, the hero, and all his special surroundings, are of an abstract character entirely fatal to interest.

The review comes to an end with expressions of mixed regret and altruism:

All this is very painful to say, for it is a disturbance of the sentiments which we have ourselves shared with all the rest of the English public; but there is a time when dissent must find voice, and when it is well both for the public and the magician who sways it that a frank opinion should be expressed without fear or favour, especially at a moment when the public and its guides have alike grown timid, and everybody hesitates to say what most people think.

Edward Dowden's essay is patently an answer to the critics of George Eliot's "second style" and of Daniel Deronda in particular. It is a defence of George Eliot, placing her "among artists who with Shakspeare unite breadth of sympathy with power of interpreting the rarer and more intense experiences of the souls of men."

The demands which such a work makes upon the reader are so large and so peculiar, that it is not a matter of surprise that at first it should ... speak fully to only a comparatively few ...

The critics of the work have not been prepared to meet these demands and have taken the easier course:

To start aside from the creator's idea, and to fortify oneself by some commonplace of vulgar cynicism, is not difficult; it is less easy to listen, to receive, to keep, and to depart pondering things in one's heart.

The carping critics are not the only ones who have read the book; there are others and they should give their testimony:

Those who have heard in it "the right voice" ... will have been conscious of a quickening and exaltation of their entire spiritual life during eight successive months ... The moral atmosphere they breathed became charged with a finer and more vivifying element ...;

there follows a long list of the benefits that the book brought into the lives of such readers.

Dowden proceeds then to a criticism of Middlemarch that acts as a preliminary to that of Daniel Deronda: it starts from the premise that Middlemarch is "critical" while its successor "aims at being in a certain sense constructive"; the second is "a counterpoise or a correlative" to the first, so that Middlemarch is not "the final word of our great imaginative teacher".

There we saw how two natures framed for large disinterested services to humanity can be narrowed - the one into the round of the duteous sweet observances of domestic life - the other into the servitude ... which the world imposes upon those

who accept its base terms ... Here we are shown how two natures can be ennobled and enlarged: the one rescued through anguish and remorse, and by the grace ... which the soul of man has power to bestow upon the soul of man; ... the other [delivered] from the danger of neutrality in the struggle between common things and high.

He next turns to those who have underestimated the power involved in the creation of Deronda himself:

That some clever critics should find the hero of George Eliot's last novel detestable is easily understood; that some should find him incredible proves no more than that clever critics in walking from their lodgings to their club, and from their club to their lodgings, have not exhausted the geography of the habitable globe.

A Grandcourt whose nature is one main trunk of barren egoism from which all the branches of fresh desire have withered off, is recognized forthwith to be human. But Deronda, sensitive at every point with life which flows into him and throughout him, and streams forth from him in a beneficent energy, - Deronda is a pallid shadow rather than a man!

"But Deronda is described, he does not act?" His college friend is successful, however, and Mirah is rescued, and Gwendolen restored and renewed, and the existence of Mordecai is prolonged beyond his death in a life of faithful and devoted effort. This is the action of the sun, and half of it transmutes itself into other forms of energy than the original heat and light.

In the succeeding pages, Dowden justifies George Eliot's use of the language of science¹⁰² and the elaborateness of her

102 "Language, the instrument of literary art, is an instrument of ever-extending range, and the truest pedantry, in an age when the air is saturated with scientific thought, would be to reject those accessions to language which are the special gain of the time."

style, defends her against those who criticize the Mordecai-Deronda episodes "from the liberal, prosaic point of view",¹⁰³ and chastises the English for the insularity of their thinking in their dismissal of Mordecai.¹⁰⁴ A series of spirited dissections of the central characters in the book leads to the pious concluding sentences:

"Daniel Deronda" closes in the presence of death; "Middlemarch" with promises of happy living; yet "Middlemarch" leaves the heart as though in the greyness of a sweet August twilight ... Death, as we witness it in the concluding chapter of "Daniel Deronda", is solemn and beautiful as a sunset, but we see the stars come forth, and are aware that the world is revolving into a nobler dawn.

Sidney Colvin's fifteen pages in the Fortnightly steer a middle course between the two extremes represented by the other long articles. It is altogether more level-headed and bland than either of them, making its points soberly and, on the whole, without reference to the criticisms of other reviewers. Above all it is a sympathetic account, not only

103 Quoting Mill: "Nowadays nature and probability are thought to be violated if there be shown to the reader, in the personages with whom he is called upon to sympathize, characters on a larger scale than himself, or than the persons he is accustomed to meet at a dinner or a quadrille party."

104 "Probably none but English readers in our day would refuse to accept as deserving of imaginative credence such an idea as that which inspires Mordecai ... [for] the idea of nationality ... has played and is playing so important a part on the continent of Europe."

of Daniel Deronda, but of George Eliot's place in English letters.¹⁰⁵

The opening paragraph gives a vivid impression of the effect of a new George Eliot novel:

Conversation has ebbed and flowed over the questions, will Gwendolen hate her husband enough to kill him? Will Daniel care for the Jewess enough to marry her? ... Society has asked itself, are Hebrew prophets really to be found to-day in back streets off Holborn, and is a gathering of the Israelites an event which may really happen tomorrow? ... We have all had our say, and if to many the book has seemed not easy, and to some not agreeable, the interest of all is the great tribute to its power; find what faults we please, it is certain that no other writer living is able thus to arrest, occupy, and nourish our thoughts.

After a general description of her "social philosophy" and the difference of her outlook from that of most of her fellow-novelists, Colvin comes to an analysis of how, in Daniel Deronda, George Eliot has tried to combine the story of the "spoiled" Gwendolen Harleth with a second plot which contains "the history of a private passion which presently becomes associated and identified with devotion to a public cause." The reviewer skillfully summarizes the dangers inherent in such an attempt, and in doing so suggests why the book has been so strange for so many:

105 This more general section will not be described here. It is reprinted in Lerner and Holstrom, pp. 171-176.

In choosing this particular form of social passion, and making her love-tale revolve in this particular one of the grander orbit of what has been and shall be, the author has encountered great difficulties. ... we find it hard to believe that the gathering of the Jews, and the promotion of their national destinies, is a cause real and substantial enough to consecrate the love of Deronda and Mirah. Most readers ... are likely to know little, if anything, of an inner, or a higher, life among the modern Jews, and to be slow in realising Mordecai as a serious personage, or in believing that a man of the world like Deronda, having taken up Mordecai's ideas, will be able to make anything of them. It is not a question of what may or may not, as a matter of fact, be going on about us, but of what our imagination can effectively realise.

Having said this, however, and having expressed admiration for the way "George Eliot puts forth both power and skill" and for her having made Mordecai "a striking figure of romance ... picturesque, impressive even, and not too impossible", Colvin feels obliged to join in a familiar complaint - "but real, near, and living he does not seem" and goes on to add that "the worst is, that the fair and innocent figure of Mirah herself somehow shares, for us, her brother's insubstantiality."

Colvin's next critical point is equally familiar, "but ne'er so well expressed":

It is very different with the other heroine. Gwendolen Harleth, I think, is one of the happiest as well as the most completely studied of George Eliot's creations. At first, indeed, we are not quite sure about her. There is a suspicion of the unwholesome - even of the unladylike ... but these

are not followed up and we presently forget them. In the sequel Gwendolen leaves us with an impression not only perfectly real, but in spite of her faults, which fate and the author visit with so little mercy, singularly fascinating. She is presumptuous, she is vain, she is full of herself and without much heart for others, she has at first no idea of anything but enjoying life, she does, or rather drifts into, a great wrong; but yet she keeps a hold on our sympathies.

His description of the clash between Gwendolen and Grandcourt is similarly illuminating of the Victorian point of view:

Grandcourt is a kind of domestic Castlereagh, cold, absolute, placidly arrogant and heartless. In all things narrow and impenetrable, he is subtle in the arts of rule. ... Her girlish and confident spirits find themselves confronted and subdued by something far more stubborn. ... True, the author has not thought fit to show us the process and stages of subjugation, but I think, she has made us feel that the subjugation was inevitable. ... Her selfishness is the selfishness of ignorance and high spirits; his, of hardened and unalterable character. ... His perfect hatefulness, and her perfect helplessness, are exhibited in a few most masterly scenes. He is all the more hateful for being never otherwise than within his rights; he is unimpeachable, however intolerable.

Colvin traces Gwendolen's progress through the novel and reveals his uneasiness with the way in which "there is no triumphant or satisfying issue to a career which we have followed and realised as we have Gwendolen's". He goes so far, indeed, as to speculate about her future after the

story ends, and offers the "presentiment" that she will "by-and-by please everybody about her by relenting to her old lover, Rex".

This unhappiness with the resolution of one half of the story is exacerbated by dissatisfaction with the ending of the other half:

The whole book seems thrown out of balance and harmony when the plot which chiefly interests us ends thus, while happiness and fulfilment crown the other, in which we interest ourselves little by comparison.

The heart of the matter is not hard to discover: "Daniel Deronda is disappointing". Colvin joins the ranks of those whom Dowden castigates, for he goes on at great length to describe how Deronda weakens the book:

... he is not what he ought to be, or at all equal to the fine things we are told concerning him ... A man who does nothing, who is ever so ready and helpful in other people's affairs, but has no pursuit of his own which a woman can enter into, or distinction which she can admire, is surely not the likeliest to influence women. ... cold certainly he is, to be armed always with so much philosophy in his interviews with this piteous, beautiful, and appealing creature. ... We could even believe he had fire in him, if he showed in his wooing of Mirah. But ... Deronda is towards Mirah the coolest of lovers.

A short paragraph on the minor characters - "described ... with only too abundant patience and brilliancy of workmanship" - leads into a long section on the author's style,

and here too the reviewer follows the middle of the road, praising and criticizing with grace and fervour. He does however come down in the end regretfully on the side of those who wish for something better in her work:

... I do not urge that an idea should never be elaborated, and all it includes brought out, ... only that continually to do this gives us a sense of strain and effort, and that strain and effort seem to me qualities which are growing in George Eliot's work to its injury. One cannot help wishing, of this great spirit, that its tension might sometimes seem relaxed; one cannot, as one reads, help thinking of that other manner in which everything is said - so much of the thing as is wanted and no more - perfectly and easily, and then left.

There follows, as a conclusion to the essay, a very lengthy comparison between George Eliot and George Sand (most of it quoted by Lerner and Holmstrom) which ends with a charming compliment, less agreeable perhaps than Dowden's enthusiasm, but, it is to be assumed, acceptable to the object of its praise.

... except the beautiful "weaver of Raveloe," no tale of George Eliot's has the same art and unity as ["François le Champi" "La petite Fadette" etc.], none leaves us with the same charmed and touched impression, and none is written with the same instinct for contriving and chaining together situations of natural beauty and emotion, nor conducted from opening to close with anything like the same harmonious skill. On the other hand, every work of George Eliot is rich with a multitude of things which the work of George Sand does not contain - scenes of various and abundant comedy, homely

humour of the soil and trained humour of the author's own, wit and wisdom, sarcasm and sympathy, a crowd of subordinate characters all standing out in sharpest definition ... To each her crown; and of what has above been said of the author of "Daniel Deronda," may nothing count as said in breach of the grateful reverence and affection which from all of us are hers.

There is nothing to suggest that Hardy paid any attention to the criticisms levelled against his contemporaries, but had he done so he would surely have found the reception of Daniel Deronda illuminating. It might have shown him that even the most eminent of novelists was not free from the possibility of severe and scornful criticism. It might have demonstrated how petty and philistine was the taste of the generality of reviewers in the less serious journals. It might have revealed how easy it was to misread a book and to misunderstand the character of one who is virtuous, though not in the commonplace way. All of these would have been useful lessons for him to have learned.

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iv. The Gamekeeper at Home

The Gamekeeper at Home, is not, of course, a novel: it finds a place in this thesis, nevertheless, partly because Richard Jefferies later turned to the writing of novels,

partly because there were no novels of merit published in 1878 apart from The Return of the Native, but most importantly because the book occasioned a number of reviews that make it clear how widespread (if not how profound) was the townsman's interest in the countryside. This trait in the habits of the reading public is clearly significant in any consideration of Hardy's reputation in his own time.

Jefferies' first book had begun as a series of articles in the Pall Mall Gazette, where they attracted enough attention to lead Smith, Elder to ask the author in January 1878 if he would agree to their publishing the articles collected into one small volume. An edition of 1500 copies appeared in July¹⁰⁶ and so enthusiastic was its reception that by mid-September only one hundred copies were left, and Smith, Elder were preparing a second edition. This in turn sold well, and in early November Jefferies was informed that there was "every probability" of a third edition being required.¹⁰⁷

106 The standard biography (Richard Jefferies, Man of the Fields, Looker and Porteus, London, 1965) says on page 115 that the book was "sent out in August" but the Globe reviewed it as early as July 10 and four other periodicals did so before the first of August.

107 W. J. Keith (in Richard Jefferies, A Critical Study, Toronto, 1965) says that the book "ran into four editions by 1880" - p. 19.

That The Gamekeeper at Home found favour with the reviewers is abundantly clear: among the fourteen notices there is scarcely a single word of adverse criticism. It is true that some of the important periodicals did not review the book at all,¹⁰⁸ but any member of the reading public would certainly have come across one or two notices, and wherever he came across them he would have found the book recommended.

The form the book takes led to its winning applause on two quite different counts: the first as a description of the gamekeeper's life and work, the second as a celebration of the English countryside. Several reviews see the book as a mixture of both of these - which, of course, it is - and give it credit on both scores. It is possible in every case, however, to discern whether the reviewer regards it as a book primarily for the landed gentry or primarily for the nature-lover. Six reviewers take the former view (two of them saying that it is a book that deserves a place in any country gentleman's library), while eight are inclined to the latter. Among those who tend to see the book mainly as a work of natural history, six of

108 I have not been able to find reviews in the Athenaeum nor in the Spectator.

the eight make a direct reference to Gilbert White, usually to the effect that The Gamekeeper at Home is the best book of its kind since The Natural History of Selborne.¹⁰⁹ It is notable that the three reviews that refer to the "poetry" of Jefferies' work, or make some similar claim, include one of the "gamekeeper" school.

Three of the first four reviews to appear put the greatest stress on the book's significance as a picture of the gamekeeper's life. In the Globe, the reviewer pays tribute to the anonymous author as "some one who knows the class he so well describes ... [and who gives] a correct notion of the trials, temptations and vicissitudes" that the gamekeeper undergoes. Almost all of the long review that follows is given up to showing how Jefferies' observation of the gamekeeper's life is in accord with the reviewer's - and implying, as a result, how accurate it is. He offers a

109 It may be worth noting that while several reviewers pay some attention to the character of the gamekeeper himself, none of them is inclined to make a point that Keith (p. 61) makes in drawing attention to the way in which Jefferies regretted "that White did not pay a similar attention to 'a natural history of the people of his day'", a deficiency that Jefferies hoped to make good in his own work. Keith goes on, "... White's qualities are the foundations upon which Jefferies builds; the latter's work depends upon White's earlier achievement, but surpasses it in scope." A little earlier he has referred to the way in which Jefferies' "magic" is lacking in White - p. 60.

welcome to "his well-written little volume ... drawing attention to a hard-working, honest, determined body of men", and this in spite of his having noticed that gamekeepers are "confirmed grumblers" and have a weakness for expecting a tip, a practice that has "greatly impaired the friendly relations which used to subsist in England between the rich and the poor." The reviewer joins the author in seeing gamekeepers as "a rather interesting race ... when [their] somewhat repellent crust is penetrated."

If all the reviews had been like the Globe's the book would hardly have attained the popularity it did, but ten days later the Examiner,¹¹⁰ while dealing at length with the gamekeeping sections, brought out some of the book's other attractions. The review appears to be the work of someone familiar with some aspects at least of country life; it points out an error in Jefferies' description of fox hunting, confesses to trout-poaching in earlier days, and speaks with some feeling and at great length about unscrupulous keepers. This familiarity gives added weight to the compliments the reviewer pays to The Gamekeeper at Home which has, he says, "a ring of deep reality" about it. In longer passages, he makes two points

110 July 20, 1878.

that appear again frequently - that, while "teeming with anecdotes of gamekeepers amusingly written", the book is interesting at several levels, and that it provides a breath of country air for the city-dweller:

As we wade through the chapters which describe the haunts of birds ... all seems so lifelike that we can for the moment fancy ourselves away from the metropolis, and sauntering through some quiet and well preserved cover.

[The book is written in] a style so graphic and unaffected, and yet so true to life and nature ... [that] we can recommend [it] ... not only to country gentlemen and sportsmen, but also to all who have a taste for natural history, and for a study of human nature, sketched from the life.

The review that appeared in the World on July 24, brief and entirely to the point, is clearly of a kind that would send many a reader to Mudies if not to a bookseller:¹¹¹ it says simply

This is a most delightful book, perhaps the best test of its excellence being that it will afford unwearied amusement alike to those who are deeply versed in, or wholly ignorant of, the country life

111 Perhaps to both; a letter to Jefferies from an acquaintance, quoted by Looker and Porteus (p. 116), makes it clear that, then as now, the library could be a stepping-stone to the bookshop - "I had the book from Mudies, but shall buy it now. It is quite a book to take up when you wish to pay a fireside visit to the country lanes and hedges."

which it describes in the minutest detail. In these days, when every petty novelist thinks it necessary to pad out his dull plot with Brummagem descriptions of scenery or sport derived at fifth-hand from writers almost as incompetent as himself, it is refreshing to find an author as learned as Gilbert White, and with an even more pleasant manner of recording his observations.

The two reviews that appeared on July 27 are as different as can be. The Academy in a short notice pays most attention to the work as "a handy-book of reference" and writes about such topics as the man-trap, gun and timepiece, the new words that the reader learns, and the gamekeeper's views of health and of the reasoning power of dogs. The reviewer does acknowledge, however, that the book is pleasant as well as "shrewd" and that he must

draw attention to the sketches, botanical lore, clear insight into problems of arboriculture, and the author's delightful enthusiasm in the poetry of his subject.

The emphasis in John Bull is the reverse of that: the reviewer here concedes that "the writer has done a service to country squires" as well as "town loungers" by reprinting the articles from the Pall Mall Gazette, but he goes on immediately to say that the title of the book had not been "judiciously chosen", for it is not "as some might suspect, a volume for the estate-agent or the land-steward". For this reviewer the book is "one of the 'History of Selborne'

class, with just such careful notices of rural sights and sounds and of simple country life", and to this has been added the portrait of the gamekeeper and his home: "Who can doubt but that the author, in describing the residence of the gamekeeper, is sketching with the object full before his eyes."¹¹² The reviewer deals briefly with the sequence of episodes in the book, writing about the keeper himself, his family, the animals he observes, the birds, human predators - tramps and poachers, and dishonest gamekeepers - and then makes the point again that the book is doubly useful, especially because of those parts that remind him of "old Gilbert White":

... the experiences of the writer will specially interest and prove of value to the country gentleman ... whilst, however, those pages will possess a special value to this class of readers, they will interest a far wider class. The denizens of our huge over-grown cities and manufacturing towns will probably enjoy this volume even more than those who live in the country and can test the value of the writer's observations and suggestions. ... The whole makes a pleasant, healthy book, full of enticement to those who ought to recruit their jaded spirits by a plunge into country life ... a delightful chatty volume, to be packed in the carpet-bags of those who are meditating a six-weeks' [!] sojourn out of sight and sound and smell of town smoke and town noises and town sewers.

112 A justifiable observation, for Jefferies did have a particular person and a particular house in mind as he wrote.

We could wish them no pleasanter pages, and we only regret ... that the book is so small, and that the notices of the observant writer should so soon come to an end.

The longest and most substantial review received by The Gamekeeper at Home was the one that appeared in the Saturday on August 10, 1878. The reviewer is chiefly concerned with the book as a work of natural history, and makes several shrewd observations that escape the others; he has, for example, this acutely accurate impression of the author's early life:

The author has been bred and brought up in the country. As a boy, we can imagine him the counterpart of Master Martin, the memorable "old madman" of Tom Brown's Schooldays: although he must have escaped that young enthusiast's more objectionable eccentricities. We can see him following at the heels of keepers, making friends with rat-catchers, rabbiters, mole-trappers, et id genus omne; poking about the enclosures of woodland farms, and trespassing in plantations at the peril of his neck, especially in the bird-nesting season. As he grew in years, these tastes must have grown stronger, with the increasing avidity of knowledge that stimulated his inquisitiveness. The unobservant inhabitant of the country who seldom uses his eyes, and still more the casual cockney visitor, knows little or nothing of its manifold charms. He is struck with a pleasing view, he enjoys the song of the birds, and, as he admires the flickering play of the light on the foliage, is dimly conscious of the awakening of latent susceptibilities. In wet weather or in the depth of the winter he finds the country as dull as the gloom is depressing. It is very different with the man who loves nature for nature's sake, as does the writer of these delightful sketches. To him all seasons are full of interest, although he may prefer the long bright days ...

The Saturday Review also hints at the way in which the gamekeeper himself while being "naturally ... the central figure" acts as a link with the wider world of the countryside: "the keeper, in his own rough, half-unconscious way, becomes a keen admirer of nature. He learns to know and to love the very trees, to regard them with a tenderness he hardly feels for his fellow-creatures."¹¹³ The reviewer likewise has the most perceptive comment about Jefferies' style:

Whether he is chatting or writing about his favourite subjects, one point naturally suggests another, so that the simpler threads of his ideas are apt to get entangled in his associations. This indeed is the chief and almost the only fault we can find in this singularly fascinating volume. The author is tempted into digressions; he wastes most interesting matter by gratuitously condensing it, occasionally dismissing with a passing allusion a theme which might have been expanded into a chapter. After all, these are errors that can be easily repaired, the writer has only to go over the ground again, reaping or gleaning after himself; and perhaps a gossipy and somewhat desultory style is the best suited to his favourite subjects.

113 This is one of the few observations about the gamekeeper's character that appear in the reviews: he seems for most reviewers to be a rather shadowy figure, something of a peg on which to hang the book. This contrasts with the discussion in Keith's book (p. 63) where he describes the attitudes of several notable critics of Jefferies who have found Haylock "unsatisfactory" and then defends Jefferies against them. There is, on the other hand, ample confirmation of Keith's point about the form of Jefferies' book, with the gamekeeper acting as a connecting link between a multitude of scenes that are designed "to portray the natural world in all its variety, to present the fascination which is part of our appreciation of the countryside" - p. 62.

The reviewer ends his notice by suggesting that "if villagers of loose habits were more given to reading, the keeper would have little cause to be grateful to the author" for "there is a chapter which might have a great circulation were it published separately under the title of the 'Poacher's Best Companion' "

but readers of a very different class cannot fail to appreciate the rare gifts of sympathetic observation, whether the author is simply expatiating on the charms of nature or describing the habits of the wild creatures. . . . indeed the lover of the country can hardly fail to be fascinated whenever he may happen to open the pages. It is a small volume, and not expensive, it is a book to be read and kept for reference, and should be on the shelves of every country gentleman's library.

Reviews in the Morning Post, Daily News, and Whitehall Review followed in quick succession,¹¹⁴ adding little to the range of criticism that had appeared. The Morning Post regards the book as "a readable volume, describing the characters, habits and occupations of a useful race of men" and acknowledges that there is also much "calculated to interest the student of natural history". The Daily News, placing great emphasis on the gamekeeper parts of the book, remarks on the "fidelity of the portrait", something that will be recognized by "any reader who is familiar with

114 On August 20, 22, and 24, 1878 respectively.

rural life". While acknowledging that it is "full of tokens of intimate acquaintance and strong sympathy with life in the field", the reviewer fears that the book is "not for all readers, because all readers have not sympathy with field sports"; still it is "a very genuine book in its way, displaying much knowledge, much love of the subject, and no small amount of literary power." The Whitehall takes up the strain that "this is a perfect book for an English gentleman's library":

For a series of realistic descriptions of the anecdotal sort commend us to that charming brochure of an anonymous but brilliant raconteur, entitled "The Gamekeeper at Home."

The reviewer dwells particularly on the poacher and writes feelingly about "the human fox, who has even less sense of humour than his pilfering prototype".

A week later, on September 3, 1878, the Standard published an enthusiastic review running to a column and a half, and presumably gave the book a helping hand towards a second edition. There is little that is new, apart from some unimportant asides,¹¹⁵ but there is a respectfulness about

115 "So kindly a writer might have done good by a heartier condemnation of the cruel traps too often used by unfeeling people"; "It is odd ... that the author seems to consider an ordinary repeating watch a rare instrument, almost peculiar to gamekeepers"; "Sir Wilfred Lawson will regret to hear that the keeper is not a total abstainer"; an anecdote about a three-legged rabbit; an explanation of why a dog turns round before lying down; and praise for the "idyll of a hollow tree".

the tone of the review that must have been gratifying to Jefferies; some of the sentences must have been very encouraging indeed:

... the little book very thoroughly deserves all the kind things that are said about it. ... [It] has two great merits - the author possesses a perfect knowledge of his theme, and knows also how best to treat it. The simplicity of the book is its principal charm, and the amount of information compressed within so narrow a compass its most remarkable feature. ... we may thank the author ... for an admirable accomplishment of a useful task. A study of "The Gamekeeper at Home" will in many cases add a new charm to country life, and awaken a hearty and intelligent interest in the denizens of the woods and fields.

The notice that appeared in Vanity Fair¹¹⁶ is of the second edition, an achievement it regards as "natural and proper". There is a great deal of quotation in a very lengthy review, almost all of which is devoted to the natural history side of the book: "the gamekeeper is no more than a peg on which the author has hung the results of his own patient and loving observation."¹¹⁷ Like other reviewers, the writer in Vanity Fair is struck by the transparency of the style, remarking on how "it is all artlessly put together - a charm in itself in these days of

116 October 26, 1878.

117 In spite of this, the reviewer draws attention to some parts of the gamekeeper narrative, especially to his "homely wisdom".

overwrought symmetry", and suggesting that the book "is the work of one who with love and patience has watched for and seen the things that other men pass by, and who has set them down simply and plainly. So it is that all books should be made."

Three of the best reviews were yet to appear, for the book was still being noticed in the early months of 1879. The January issue of the Westminster contains a paean of praise in which the only unkind word comes in the long comparison with Gilbert White with which the review opens:

Never since White made Selborne sacred has so fascinating a book on the country appeared. To say that it is not the peer of White's great work is only to say that it will not take rank with English classics. ... it might be said that White knew nature from the inside, and that [this] author ... knows her from the outside; that the chronicler of Selborne when he sought consolation for his disappointed human love, in the cultus of the nature that never did betray the heart that loved her, lived, like Thoreau, so long in her unceasing companionship and worship, as to be considered in some sense initiated into the priesthood of her mysteries, whereas the new author speaks only with the authority of a keen patient observer.

After that the compliments flow forth: "a pastoral picture that has really enriched our literature"; "a source of most exquisite pleasure"; "talk ... as pleasant as the babble of the Syracusan fishermen given to us in the golden numbers of Theocritus";

The great charm of the book lies in its evident truth of inspiration and description. It has none of the sham rusticity, none of the elaborate efforts after word-painting which so often do service for the presentation of rural scenes. The smell of the earth is about the book ... the odorous keen air of the pine-woods; all the sounds and sights of field and forest come upon its unfamiliar reader ...

The review in the Guardian for March 5, 1879 is unusual in the amount of attention it pays to the keeper and his fellows. The gamekeeper is "a capital sketch" even if he is "slightly too idealised and brightly coloured". The reviewer observes that the loneliness, isolation and authority involved in his work "can scarcely fail ... to invest his manner with a certain reserve and dignity" and that his "continual intercourse with men of the highest station and education ... can scarcely fail to add some sort of unconscious refinement ... to his bearing and his speech." There is a certain relief at the lack of emphasis in the book on 'sport' and at how "it is manifestly a pleasure to the writer when the gun is not so much an instrument of slaughter as an excuse for spending a summer afternoon on a warm bank." The reviewer is impressed by the way in which the author has "invariably kept within his own knowledge" and by the effect that the subject has wrought upon the writer's style.

... the writing, simple and unpretentious as it is, becomes full of deep poetic feeling, and imaginative power, and that subtle perception of all true beauty of form and harmony of colour, which grows insensibly on those who really study nature for its own sake.

Finally, Blackwood's notice, published in the April 1879 issue and benefitting from the appearance of Wild Life in a Southern County since the publication of The Gamekeeper at Home. The review calls the anonymous author "by far the most accomplished rural enthusiast who has written of late years" and "one of the men you cannot help liking, just as he loves the wild creatures of all kinds, among whom he has evidently lived since his childhood." The reviewer is impressed by the way in which, "like our old friend the incumbent of Selborne", nothing escapes his notice; by his powers of observation - "the eye of an artist for the beauties of nature" and the way in which he "catches every detail" of the homesteads at which he has evidently been "a familiar and welcome guest"; and by his ability in "drawing out the inmates, and getting at their innermost thoughts ... their quaint fancies ... their lingering remains of superstition." It seems that no praise is too high:

He does the geography and hydrography of the parishes and chalk-downs, with a careful exactness of touch that would do credit to the Ordnance Survey. ... He should be president of a staff college for gamekeepers and foresters.

There may have been more repetition than usual in these excerpts from reviews, but the purpose has been to demonstrate how strongly held was the interest in country life, at least in some quarters, and how the reviewers assume the usefulness of recommending the book, as the Guardian does, as one that is

delightful for those whose life is spent among rural associations, and no less so to those who are forced to derive their ideas of field and break and forest rather from reading than from personal acquaintance.

It all suggests that when the reviewers of Hardy's novels express delight in his scenes from rural life they are not doing so for the sake of form; they are reflecting what appears to have been a widespread predilection for "armchair nature study", and an even more widespread satisfaction with first-hand knowledge lucidly and skillfully conveyed.

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v. The Portrait of a Lady

When the present-day reader comes to consider the reviews of The Portrait of a Lady he finds himself on far more familiar ground than any he encounters in charting the

reputations of other novelists. In most other instances, the views expressed - about Hardy, about Meredith, about Gissing and the rest - include a number which have no modern counterparts; it is difficult to believe, in some cases, that the contemporary reviewer and the modern reader are thinking about the same book or the same writer. With Henry James it is different. The appreciation of his talent is not, perhaps, as fully developed as in the writings of later devotees - though it is no less keen - but when it comes to spirited denigrations, and puzzled ambivalence from those not engaged in the thick of the battle, it is clear that there has been little shift of opinion. Those who found him impossible in 1881 did so for much the same reasons as do those who find him impossible now; the same is true for the different generations of those who can appreciate James's strengths but cannot be sure that it is all worth the effort.

The reason is, surely, not hard to find. James's novels forced their readers to consider the potentialities of the novel to a greater extent than any other contemporary works; they obliged readers in the 1880's to form battle-lines as they oblige readers now - who have, admittedly, much more to take into consideration - to decide what it is they look

for in a novel. They were, in a sense, the first modern novels, at least so far as contemporary readers were concerned,¹¹⁸ and as such drew forth reactions that were, in a sense, modern reactions. Henry James, Jr. was different, and could not be ignored.

The limits within which the critical debate took place were as wide then as they are now; two excerpts, from the Globe¹¹⁹ and the Academy¹²⁰ respectively, will demonstrate the range:

A good deal has been written about Mr Henry James, junior, with the result of convincing us, in the first place, that nobody has yet succeeded in understanding him, and, secondly, that the general failure is owing to the fact that there is nothing in his fiction - except when he contrives by his manner to make platitudes pass for profundities - to understand. Of course this is all shamefully

118 It may be true, as Walter Allen for example suggests, that Daniel Deronda was the first modern novel, and there may be others besides George Eliot for whom a claim could be made, but all novelists before James had had their beginnings in works that called for nothing new in the way of critical insight - and even their most 'experimental' work has a skeleton of conventional concern for plot and the presentation of characters which gave the more conventional critics a toe-hold, an entrée, and saved them from having to reconsider the novel to such an extent that they were forced, as they were with James, to come to any new conclusions as to what it was capable of doing and saying.

119 February 3, 1882.

120 November 26, 1881.

Philistine, and rank heresy, but it is difficult, at the bidding of even the most superior people, to lay aside the life-long belief that a novel without life, or recognisably life-like portraiture, without motive, without incident, without wit, pathos, or humour, is not to be regarded with admiration.

... the "peculiar difference" of his work is so valuable, so interesting, and at the same time so rare that one wants space for the celebration of it, and can spare none for complaint that some things are absent which we can get in plenty elsewhere. To note one achievement among many, I think that nothing in this book or in its predecessors is more remarkable than the masterly painting of moral and intellectual atmosphere - the realisable rendering not of character itself, but of those impalpable radiations of character from which we apprehend it long before we have data that enable us fully to comprehend it. As soon as we fairly see Mr. James's personages we have an impression, vague but sufficing, of their full possibilities, so that when we part from them we feel that they have not surprised or disappointed us, but have proved themselves consistent and homogeneous; and what makes this peculiar "effect" so valuable and interesting is that it is attained not by the hackneyed tricks and contrivances of ordinary fiction, but by the honest and direct workmanship which generally contents itself with a broad, fairly recognisable veracity, devoid of anything like subtlety of portraiture.

Such views stand almost as far apart as Geismar and Leavis.

The Globe is alone in finding the book and its author absolutely without redeeming features, and it is the only one to adopt a tone of unmitigated derision; the end of the review is clearly intended to be withering:

... the description of one of the characters, Gilbert Osmond, is a fair account of the whole novel, with the alteration of a single word - "Everything he did

was pose: pose so deeply calculated that, if one were not on the look-out, one mistook it for" profundity, or reserved strength, or anything that may correspond to Mr. Osmond's "impulse" in Mr. Henry James. We cannot imagine that "The Portrait of a Lady" will be much read, but as it will be the superior thing to admire it, it is no doubt immensely admired.

While they are not so blunt nor so scornful, there are other reviewers who can make virtually nothing of the book. "This work", the Morning Post¹²¹ declares, "is an absolute trial to the patience of even the most ardent of his admirers. It is, indeed, impossible to conceive a duller tale or a more wordy book." The Queen¹²² also fears that James has damaged his reputation: "In the present instance Mr. James excels himself in his besetting sin of obscuring his design ... by explaining overmuch." The two reviews make it clear that in their view James has given priority to unimportant considerations, either "a drawing [that is] all anatomy" as the Queen expresses it, or, for the Morning Post, a concern for "nothing else but style"; they know that most novel-readers are more interested in other things:

121 January 19, 1882.

122 October 12, 1881.

He excels in painting miniatures of society life and manners, but when one has three volumes of this kind of tame work it becomes rather tiresome, and one is apt to turn with pleasure to Mr. James's contemporaries' less beautifully written but certainly more exciting, pages. Chapter follows chapter in "A Portrait of a Lady" without revealing a single incident or introducing one episode worth the waste of words expended upon it ... On former occasions Mr. James managed to be more entertaining.¹²³

Mr James introduces us to a group of smart people, each trying to anatomise each other's peculiarities ... but it requires more mental effort to follow the intricate operations shown to a conclusion than most people, who look for amusement as well as instruction in light literature, will care to undergo. If Mr James were not half so clever, he would be twice as amusing.¹²⁴

Over-fastidiousness, and the absence of incident, excitement or amusement, are certainly defects in the eyes of these reviewers, but they are more the sins of omission than of commission, and the reviews have a regretful rather than an angry tone. The Globe reviewer and the writer for the Athenæum,¹²⁵ however, join in accusing James of deliberate acts of bad faith toward his readers. The Globe's accusation of "pose" has already been noted, but it also points to a specific "trick" which it believes underlies

123 Morning Post.

124 Queen.

125 November 26, 1881.

the whole book: it is

to impose some perfectly meaningless peculiarity upon a particular character, such as a hat too large, or a hat too small, so that the ingenious reader may be ashamed to confess that he does not see in it some profound and subtle meaning. It is a good trick, and Mr. Henry James, junior, does it very well. Most of the portraiture and the bulk of the conversation ... is of this description.

The Athenæum's complaint concerns its dissatisfaction with the way in which the portrait of Isabel Archer is left unfinished, and its suspicions as to the reason:

This may be a bit of mystification on Mr. James's part; if so, it can only be said that it is not a novelist's business to mystify his readers, certainly not at this length. That he has aimed at brevity may sometimes excuse an author for being obscure; but obscurity through three long volumes is unpardonable.

Earlier in its unusually long and unusually hostile review, the Athenæum had implied its more general doubts concerning James's abilities, referring to "page after page of narrative and description in which the author goes on refining and distinguishing, as if unable to hit on the exact terms necessary to produce the desired effect." After summarizing the plot very briefly, and noting that "the theme is one which seems to possess an inexhaustible attraction for the author", the review comes to the point where it reveals (as do many others) its crucial difference of opinion with the author concerning the need for a novel to

have a resolution, a proper ending:

... the reader fancies that Mr. James intends to bring about a crisis; yet the only result is to decide her to make a journey against her husband's wishes, and the story leaves her just started back to rejoin him. Nor is the least hint given to show in what way their subsequent relations are to be modified either by her knowledge of his past offences or by her disobedience to his orders. That is to say, this so-called "portrait of a lady" is left unfinished just at the point where some really decisive and enlightening strokes begin to be possible.

Even when James demonstrates a virtue that in the ordinary way the Athenaeum values highly - reticence, "a repugnance for the gushing and sensational" - he carries things too far, so that the reviewer, instead of being satisfied, has another cause for complaint, and has to offer a most unusual recommendation:

He should remember that much of human life cannot be painted in "tertiary" tints, and that if he wishes to be a master in the art of portraying it he must furnish his box with some stronger colours, and lay them on boldly.¹²⁶

One of the barbs in the Globe's review had been, "To profess enjoyment of a novel by Mr Henry James, junior, is a well-known note of the superior mind"; the Academy's

126 The Academy makes just the opposite point: "the impressive effects of strong emphasis [are] achieved by that delicate attenuation which is as reposeful to the mental eye as the harmony of low-toned colours is to the physical".

reviewer is not alone in being prepared to be numbered among those of superior mind - the Daily News¹²⁷ and the Daily Telegraph¹²⁸ both declare their admiration. The Telegraph devotes a large part of its short review to a consideration of the disadvantages of serial publication (the novel had been appearing in Macmillan's Magazine) but eventually comes to the point:

Those who have read in "Macmillan" this perfectly natural and outspoken history, ... may renew the freshness of the early chapters, may follow steadily the clue of its intent, and may justify, perhaps without applauding, its unconventional tendency and tone. From the death of Ralph Touchett, from the passionate devotion of Caspar Goodwood, from the tribulation of Isabel Osmond, will have been drawn a new draught of sympathy, that will strengthen the recollection of former scenes, and will send the reader back to dwell upon and understand their import. There is no straining for effect throughout these volumes. The effect comes when least invoked and least elaborated.

The Daily News is a good deal more precise in its compliments, and leaves the modern reader with the impression that its reviewer comes closer than any other to grasping James's intentions and the efficacy of his methods. The main part of the review is taken up with Isabel:

127 December 17, 1881.

128 December 6, 1881 - sandwiched between reviews of Christmas publications and Every Man His Own Mechanic.

It will scarcely be disputed that the central figure ... is the most powerful and masterly conception of character he has yet given to the world. The author has bent the whole weight of his imaginative strength to construct an individuality which, while remaining strictly feminine even in its imperfections, shall yet represent intellectual and moral purpose in as high a degree as he knows how to portray it. ... The skill of the delineation rests as much in what is suggested as in what is described. Isabel actually does very little, and what she does is ineffective and even disastrous; yet the reader is made to feel the upward quiver of her nature, bright, delicate, supple and strong as the steel mainspring of a watch. ... When once in the secret of the author, when the reader begins to perceive a glimpse of what evil destiny and eviler human beings are preparing for the poor proud spirit, the interest heightens into something quite beyond any effect Mr. James has before produced ... he has made in "The Portrait of a Lady" a story unique in design and treatment, and destined to hold a place in literature while works of fiction last.

The three most favourable reviews were not without their criticisms. The Daily News takes exception to the actions of two of the minor characters, and believes that "part of the first volume appears to suffer from over-refining. The story ought to be preceded by an argument, like an epic poem." The Telegraph raises the possibility that readers "may or may not be satisfied with the artistic abruptness and the unsolved doubts of the ending." The Academy makes the same point much more strongly:

He has a passion for perfection in the technique of craftsmanship, and a rather too unreserved

disdain for what would be considered by the Philistine mind much more essential conditions of success in fiction. ... He cultivates an artistic asceticism, or purism, ... which, it must be admitted, is occasionally irritating even to those who are not worshippers of Dagon. It may not be well, for example, to subordinate all other interest to plot interest, but the plot interest is not altogether contemptible. A novelist has to tell a story, though he has also to do other things which may be intrinsically better worth doing; and a story is not told when, as in The Portrait of a Lady, the last page of the third volume leaves all the threads of narration hanging loose without even an attempt to unite them.

It appears that even his devotees had missed the point of what James was attempting to achieve by refusing to draw things to a conclusion.

The seven reviews considered so far represent the two extremes of opinion. Between them are to be found another nine reviews in which admiration and exasperation are more nearly balanced. They range in length from some forty lines in the Illustrated London News¹²⁹ to six pages in the March 1882 number of Blackwood's; they also vary in quality, but all find it difficult to know what to make of the new book.

There is a certain levity in some reviews. The Illustrated, for example, begins its review: "Tea and twaddle are the terms most readily suggested by the opening

129 December 17, 1881.

scene ... and there is undoubtedly a great deal of both in the three volumes." The Times¹³⁰ suggests that "Mr James pays himself a graceful compliment in assuming the forbearance of his readers and reviewers when writing a novel of extraordinary length on a singularly unsensational subject." The Sunday Times¹³¹ notes that "their conversations have a remarkable glitter, extending to ... a bewildering depth which conforms to the Talleyrand dictum that language was given to man to conceal his thoughts." The levity is not prolonged, however, and all of these three reviews have more important points to make.

The Times for example adopts a resentful tone when dealing with the heroine:

His portrait of a lady covers a canvas of vast proportions ... Nor is there anything very original about her: on the contrary, she is the old and familiar acquaintance whom we have met in many of his former stories. ... Of course she is miserable, but although we know she must be suffering, she still remains an enigma. So much so that we doubt whether the author is right in crediting her with any excessive sensibility; and we rather take her for one of those beautiful, cold-blooded animals who may be operated on without appreciable discomfort. ... disagreeable personages decidedly predominate, and the sombre pictures of our imperfect human nature form no unfitting surrounding to the central portrait of the lady.

130 December 14, 1881.

131 December 4, 1881.

The Illustrated, on the other hand, suggests that there is in the book "probably, for those who can read with understanding, a profound psychological study, an elaborate analysis of a woman's nature". The review goes on to admit, however, that

there is scarcely any action at all from the beginning to the end ... The characters do little but talk, talk, talk ... It is somewhat doubtful whether the ordinary reader of novels will appreciate this sort of entertainment; but, on the other hand, there may be a sufficiently numerous class of readers, who do not care for incident and movement, to whom it will be a delightful change from the common style of fiction.

The Sunday Times is not so much concerned with the lack of incident as with the book's central purpose.

This is a very clever book; indeed it will probably be found much too clever by the majority of people who ... do not enter with eagerness into intricate intellectual labyrinths, nor desire to assist at microscopic examinations of motives and meanings.

It also dwells at some length, rather disapprovingly, on the characteristics of the "Americans of the United States" who people the pages of the book:

[they] are good enough to look upon the continent of Europe as a curiosity-shop and succession of panoramas provided for their amusement; its inhabitants honoured by their examination, even in certain fortunate cases by their approval. All these transatlantic people possess the highest culture ...

and suggests that Lord Warburton's proposing to Isabel after having seen her only three times is "a method probably unusual in the peerage".

The two reviews that appeared in quarterlies take the book more seriously. The British Quarterly Review,¹³² while acknowledging James's power, finds the general tone of the book distressing:

A kind of vague fatality seems to dominate all his brilliant pictures; life to him at the best seems a disappointment, and individual blindness to the irony of the lot alone makes it tolerable. The languid pessimism which is now so fashionable is here, therefore, reflected. Love, at all events, is a game of cross-purposes, in which destiny seems to guide the hands of the players to make many throws, and thus there is a sense of unconscious irony blended with paradox, which gives a kind of piquancy for other than young people, who will enjoy his bright touch, his clever dialogue, and general air of worldly knowledge and esprit.

Blackwood's on the other hand reserves its indignation for something far more specific - the ending. The reviewer has summarized the happenings of the third volume in some detail, dwelling especially on Caspar Goodwood's proposition, Isabel's response, and Henrietta Stackpole's

132 January 1882.

"significant words - the last in the book - 'Look here, Mr Goodwood,' she said; just you wait!";¹³³ the review continues:

What [does Mr. James] mean, we wonder? Isabel, as far as she has any body at all, is as free from fleshly stain as the purest imagination should desire. Is it only that in her search after experience her author felt it necessary that she should taste also the excitement of an unlawful passion? Or is it his mind to preach that the world being so hollow and miserable, and devoid of hope, the best thing we can do is to eat and drink, for tomorrow we die? Anyhow it is a most equivocal if not debasing conclusion ... As a rule Mr. James ... leaves us ... tantalised, half angry with an end which is left to our imagination. But this is not a way of leaving matters to the imagination that we can at all consent to take from his hand. Abstract as is his heroine ... we cannot endure the possibility, even, of a future stain for her. It is a sort of insult to his own art ... we have a right to expect better things.

It is interesting to see how involved and agitated the reviewer can become about a book in which he is so conscious of how hard it is "to find our way ... through the maze of delicate analysis and psychological study".

It is, perhaps, not surprising to find that the two Gazettes, the Pall Mall and the St. James's, on the whole

133 These words are not now the last in the book. There is a paragraph beginning, "On which he looked up at her - but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young ...". The paragraph was added by James when he prepared his works for the New York Edition.

approve of James and admire his new novel. They were, after all, published for members of the fashionable and intelligent world about which James tended to write, many members of which would doubtless come in more and more frequent contact with Americans of the kinds that James described. This is not to say, however, that there is automatic appreciation of the finer points of James's style or understanding of all his purposes.¹³⁴ The St. James's¹³⁵ makes this clear in its first paragraph:

... if we require the action of a story to be completed, "The Portrait of a Lady" can scarcely fail to leave an impression of want of finish, of vagueness, even of weakness on the part of the writer. When Mr. James has brought Isabel Archer to the parting of the ways ... he seems to lose the courage to make her act. We are accustomed to great quiet at the close of Mr. James's stories. He is not wont to group all his characters on the stage when the curtain falls. ... The great influence of Tourgenief has made him dwell far more on the development and analysis of a passion than on mere plot. Mr. James has not escaped the misfortune of writers who depend mainly on their power of creating a character when they have to work with an intellectual faculty just short of genius. His stories sometimes have a sense of disproportion, a feeling

134 One often feels, surely, that James would be, as it were, too clever for many of his own characters; it is not surprising if he is too clever for many of their real-life counterparts.

135 November 26, 1881.

that the impression made is less than it might have been, seeing how great and obvious the effort was.

That the reviewer is aware, however, how unusually gifted James is, becomes evident as the notice goes on

... it is in detail the highest expression Mr. James has yet given us of the best qualities of his writing. The style is throughout charming ... His phrases have been thought out, every word has been selected and weighed before being put in its place. The most vivid impression it leaves is that of the writer's distinctness of vision and mastery over his matter. He is always an artist standing outside of his work and moulding it with scientific precision. ... But Mr. James can do greater things than invent happy little phrases. There is a chapter in the third volume, in which the heroine, as it were, takes stock of her life, which is as complete a laying-bare of a character as we know. ... his easy narrative rises by steps which are imperceptible till the picture becomes awful. ... "The Portrait of a Lady" has abundant human interest to suggest thought and speculation.

The Pall Mall¹³⁶ ends its review with the same kind of praise: "There can hardly be much difference of opinion as to the great, if not unmixed, merit of this [work]. We do not know a living English novelist who could have written it." This reviewer too, though, has reservations; the novel may be "the very best piece of work Mr. James has done" and it may be "a very clever book and a book of very great interest" but there is a price to be paid:

If it has a fault it is a curious and certainly a rare one - the fault of demanding and deserving almost too much attention. There is hardly a sentence which has not been written with evident and almost superfluous care, hardly an incident or a remark which has not been inserted with evident purpose. Mr. James demands that his readers shall wrestle with him all through, and not let go their hold for a moment. This intense fashion of writing sometimes produces a slight feeling of weariness in the reader ... This sort of "preciousness" is no doubt very attractive to some people, and the ingenuity of some, and the unexpectedness of all of it, is not unengaging at first sight; but by the end of the third volume it sometimes gets a little wearisome.

The reviewer concedes, nevertheless, that the main impression to be derived from the book is that it is "in a simile of his own, 'as ripe as an October pear'" and that the over-fastidiousness that is to be found in it is "nothing much worse than the slight approach to 'sleepiness' which such a pear often exhibits." The Pall Mall's other interesting observation is a passage about the Americans in the novels that stands as a complacent contrast to the displeasure of the writer in the Sunday Times:

No Englishman of the old block really cares a straw for foreign praise or blame: it might be better if he did. But what no Englishman ... can resist is the subtle juxtaposition of unpleasant persons by which Mr. James contrives to throw up English pleasantness; and this juxtaposition becomes all the more terribly seductive when the unpleasant persons are, as they are almost wholly in his books, Americans. The Englishman who can behold any one of Mr. James's clever portraits of his own countrymen

and countrywomen without a violent temptation to echo the Pharisee in the parable must be either of a very fine moral fibre or an intellectual fibre very far from fine.

The reviews in the two major weeklies have much in common: they are both lengthy, but each uses up more than half its space with padding - the Spectator with an extremely long quotation from the novel, and the Saturday with an elaborate summary of its plot; they both recognize that James is a writer with unusual gifts; they both call their readers' attention to grave flaws; both give a modern reader valid, if limited, points of departure for an assessment of the book.

The Spectator's¹³⁷ charge is the more interesting, not only for what it suggests about James but for what it shows of the reviewer's attitudes. It is involved with what the reviewer calls agnosticism in art, and leads to the consideration of moral as well as aesthetic questions. The reviewer has referred at various points in the article to this deficiency, but it is in the final paragraph that he makes his point with force:

But the cloven hoof of Mr. Henry James's agnosticism, - as artist no less than as thinker, - is shown at the

137 November 26, 1881.

close of his tale, with even more nakedness than he has ever shown it yet. That he always likes to end his tales with a failure of anything like the old poetic justice, we all know. That perplexing relations should ravel themselves, rather than unravel themselves, and end ... in something worse than they began in, is one of Mr. Henry James's canons of art. The tendency of life, he holds, is to result in a general failure of the moral and spiritual hopes it raises. If you let your story land itself in a wreck, or fade away into a blank and pallid apathy, - that is true art to this author. But never before has he closed a novel by setting up quite so cynical a sign-post into the abyss, as ... at the end of this book. He ends ... if we do not wholly misinterpret the rather covert, not to say almost cowardly, hints of his last page, by calmly indicating that this ideal lady of his, ... saw a "straight path" to a liaison with her rejected lover ... Mr. Henry James long ago rejected the idea that real life is intelligible and significant, ... but he has never till now ventured to indicate that the natural end of a noble nature ... is ignoble surrender to selfish passion. Yet it is quite true that pure agnosticism is most likely to lead hither. Isabel is painted as trusting to nothing to keep her right in life but vague, generous aspirations, without compass and without clue; and for such a one, it is natural enough that, at the last pinch, all morality should seem nothing but convention ... We can hardly speak too highly of the skill and genius shown in many parts of The Portrait of a Lady. We can hardly speak too depreciatingly of the painting of that portrait, or of the moral collapse into which the original of the portrait is made to fall ... We are filled with wonder that agnostic Art should have gone so far as to place a great blot in the centre of a carefully-painted picture, without seeing that agnostic Art has, as Art, committed suicide in so doing.

The Saturday Review¹³⁸ offers an argument that would seem to be almost perverse compared with any modern view of the profundity of James's insight into human personality:

... we cannot help remarking the care which the writer takes not to go down, if he can possibly avoid it, below the surface of his characters and of the situations in which he places them. ... Mr. James devises a plot skilfully, and leads up to a crisis where all our expectation is awake; but when the moment for action comes, he evades the catastrophe altogether, either - which is his most common method - by making his actors do nothing at all, or by making them do something which seems to be prompted by no reasonable motive. In either case he frustrates the curiosity of the reader, and leaves him with a sense that the plot, however ingenious, breaks down at the critical moment. Mr. James has certainly many of the qualities of a fine novelist; but his reluctance to go below the surface, or to grasp a character as a whole, renders his short sketches and little episodes more successful than his longer works. For the same reason his subordinate characters, with whom he only pretends to give us a casual acquaintance, are more satisfactory than the chief actors, with whom we naturally desire a more intimate knowledge. Mr. James's method evades the main difficulty of a novelist's art; but it also cuts off the writer who uses it from attaining the highest success.

One view which the Saturday expresses here - that "subordinate characters ... are more satisfactory than the chief actors" - is one that is echoed in practically every review. Only two out of the eighteen consider Isabel to be the focus or the success James clearly intended her to be;

the rest choose other characters for praise, and compliment James through them rather than through his heroine. The Spectator, indeed, begins its review by saying "If Mr. Henry James had called his book 'The Portrait of Two Gentlemen' we might have admitted the aptness of the description" and justifies its disapproval of the actual title by saying

as for Isabel Archer ... we venture to say that the reader never sees her or realises what she is, from the beginning of the book to the close. She is the one lady of whom no portrait is given, though she is studied till the reader is weary of the study.

Similar criticisms, couched in almost identical words, are frequently found. "The one thing which the book is not, is what it calls itself" is Blackwood's verdict; the Illustrated London News suggests "the author might more reasonably have called it 'sketches of ladies and gentlemen'"; the Sunday Times regrets that "it is not easy to feel the interest in his heroine that the author would probably desire, principally on account of the indefinite nature of her aims and aspirations." Only the Academy, with its view that "the heroine is a very masterly portrait ... full of psychological interest", and the St. James's Gazette, suggesting that "the impression [of her] ... conveyed by a thousand subtle touches ... is vivid", count the creation of Isabel a success.

The most admired character, admirable both morally and artistically, is undoubtedly Ralph Touchett; he is singled out for praise by seven of the eleven reviews that go into detail about their preferences. The Sunday Times regards him as "the best drawn character in the book ... he is certainly a delightful conception; there is no sickly sentimentalism about his gentleness; on the contrary, it is enlivened with a strain of satirical humour which is as pleasant as it is harmless." Almost as popular is Henrietta Stackpole, whom the Academy describes as being "delineated with that high comedy humour which is becoming rarer every year", but both Mr. and Mrs. Touchett, Bantling and Rosier have their admirers. So too does Madame Merle, who is regarded by the St. James's Gazette as "an old friend ... - the enemy; but we never saw her full-length portrait done before so carefully", and who the Saturday suggests is "admirably sketched ... excellent till we come to her deeper motives". The Academy, on the other hand, though acknowledging her to be "the most ambitiously conceived character in the book" believes her to be "the least successful". Only the

Spectator and the Saturday¹³⁹ single Osmond out for attention, and in doing so offer to their readers the opinion that he is one of the major artistic successes of the whole work; after a lengthy excerpt from the chapter in which Osmond proposes to Isabel, the Spectator comments:

It would be difficult, we think, to surpass the delicacy and subtlety of that painting, so far as regards Mr Osmond. ... In scene after scene this character is developed, and always with some fresh touch of fastidious insolence or intense though petty pride, which makes of it a wonderful, and yet most repulsive, artistic achievement.

The reviewers choose this or that aspect of the novel on which to pin a compliment, but the reader is left with no doubt that most of them found the book as a whole beyond them; it pleased but it did not satisfy. The reviewer for Blackwood's concludes his article with these words:

The book altogether is one of the most remarkable specimens of literary skill which the critic could lay his hands upon. It is far too long, infinitely ponderous, and pulled out of all proportion by the elaboration of every detail; but there is scarcely

139 The Saturday compares him to Grandcourt in Daniel Deronda, and Blackwood's remarks how similar the swift disillusion in Osmond's and Isabel's marriage is to that which overtakes Grandcourt and Gwendolen. Cf. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 113: "Osmond so plainly is Grandcourt, hardly disguised, that the general derivative relation of James's novel to George Eliot's becomes quite unquestionable."

a page in it that is not worked out with the utmost skill and refinement, or which the reader will pass over without leaving something to regret - that is if he had the leisure for the kind of reading which is delightful for its own sake in complete independence of its subject. The conversation is an art by itself. To give an appearance of actualness and spontaneity to an artificial production so careful, refined, and elaborate, must have required a prodigious effort. ... But nothing so elaborate ever could be real, and the dazzle sometimes fatigues, though the effect is one which cannot be contemplated without admiration.

CHAPTER 7

... AND THREE THAT HAVE NOT¹

i. The Adventures of Harry Richmond

The three non-survivors from among the eight contemporary novels considered alongside Hardy's books met with quite different receptions when they first appeared, A Princess of Thule being enthusiastically praised, Workers in the Dawn roundly dismissed, and Harry Richmond misunderstood and underestimated. All, however, form illuminating contrasts with Hardy's work in their impact on the reading public.

On October 28, 1871, Smith, Elder and Company published in book form the novel which they had been serializing in the Cornhill, George Meredith's The Adventures of Harry Richmond. The likelihood is that Meredith had been engaged in writing the book at the time that he read Hardy's first novel when it was submitted to Chapman and Hall. Meredith was already a well-known author and it is clear that the reviewers had their respective assessments of previous work by him to use as yardsticks.

A sound and succinct statement of the modern view of Harry Richmond, written in the light of his whole oeuvre, is

1 The three books dealt with in this chapter are not in print in any form in 1967.

given by Lionel Stevenson:² it is reproduced here to serve as a base from which to explore the contemporary reaction:

The story had already been told in many familiar fictitious biographies - the slow, painful achievement of maturity by a youth who must conquer many illusions and suffer many miseries before he learns the truth about himself and the world. As such, it belongs with David Copperfield^[3] and Great Expectations and Pendennis. As in those novels one of the young man's strongest adversaries is his own conceit, ... the contrasting power of unselfishness is symbolized by some of the feminine characters. Meredith, however, gave his own peculiar emphasis to both themes - the absolute necessity of conquering egoism, and the superior nobility of women over men ...^[4]

A conspicuous change in style resulted from his decision to write in the first person. Subtle allusions and devious indirections had to be abandoned, for the fictitious narrator, while he was a cultivated and sensitive young man, was displayed as essentially simple and straightforward. In this assumed style Meredith was surprisingly successful; it was warm, natural, and lively ...

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- 2 Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith, New York, 1953, pp. 181-2.
 - 3 One of the few illuminating observations in an unusually pedestrian review in the Morning Post (December 2, 1871) suggests that "the reader will ... be forcibly reminded of a genial, kindly spirit, and the dear little Copperfield and Steerforth so ably depicted in one of his best novels."
 - 4 The Daily Telegraph (November 20, 1871) sees the latter: "One cannot but marvel how he ever won the heart of Janet, or retained that of the Princess Ottilia; for both are infinitely above him in character, and in all the best qualities of heart ..."

Not only was the style more natural than in his other novels, but the tempo also was more even and the plot more firmly built. The scenes proceeded in clear order and proportion; the few instances of fragmentary clues were fully justified by the limitations of the point of view. The basic outlines of the plot were almost mathematically regular: Harry was perpetually divided between the claims of his father and his maternal grandfather; he fell in love with two splendid girls, one intellectual and gracious, the other practical and assertive; ...

These structural mechanics of the book were richly overlaid with the irresistible charm of the events. There are gypsy episodes that have all the open-air freshness and picaresque vigor of Borrow. There are scenes of dynastic intrigue in a little German principality that set a model for the "Ruritanian" school of fiction. The early chapters recreate the unquestioning receptivity of childhood. And vitalizing the whole story is the unrivaled figure of an indomitable adventurer, Harry's father, Richmond Roy.

This assessment is typical in many ways, for several modern commentators⁵ share Stevenson's views of its being a novel with a well-constructed plot, an unusually (for Meredith) straightforward style and a host of interesting characters (Siegfried Sassoon counts one hundred and

5 For example, Walter Allen (The English Novel, London, 1954, p. 240) calls Richmond Roy "a fabulous figure, ... one of the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century fiction;" F. N. Lees ("George Meredith: Novelist" in From Dickens to Hardy, Volume 6 of the Pelican Guide to English Literature, edited by Boris Ford, London, 1958) speaks of the book as "his one thoroughly clear-running success ... a great achievement in the fantastic picaresque, written in decisive and clear, 'un-Meredithian' prose, and permeated by alert intelligence".

sixty-nine of them - "and all are carefully drawn"⁶) dominated by Richmond Roy. The reviewers of the day, however, were much less unanimous and much less appreciative. For the British Quarterly Review⁷ it was a "perplexing and bewildering story ... laborious, of extraordinary complicity, and of fearful length. It is profoundly difficult to feel one particle of interest in a single character till the end of the first volume. ... The style in which much of these laborious volumes is written, is fearfully obscure and elliptical." The Spectator⁸ was not much more enthusiastic:

... It wants, in the first instance, movement, stream, current, narrative-flow, and secondly, something of ease and simplicity of style. ... In spite of its animation and its fullness of life, it is very slow reading, for more than one reason. There is an allusiveness and occasionally also an affectation of affluent expressiveness about the manner of the author which are provoking, and induce one to throw the book aside for a time from vexation at its assumption.

The Examiner⁹ was harsher still:

... the net result of his efforts is a work so enigmatical, and with such constant affectation of wit, that it is very irksome reading, and so disappointing in the end that the reader who has plodded through the

6 Siegfried Sassoon, Meredith, London, 1948, p. 111.

7 January 1872.

8 January 20, 1872.

9 November 11, 1871.

three volumes is likely to vow that he will never take up another of Mr. Meredith's novels. In saying this, we believe we are speaking heresy. Mr. Meredith is a prophet to a few, and his habit of jerking out commonplaces as if they were wisdom^[10] is likely to be fascinating to some young ladies. It is a poor habit, however, and it seems to have worn itself nearly threadbare in 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond'.

The Academy¹¹ was no kinder:

If Lessing had been alive to expound the laws of romance ... Mr. George Meredith would perhaps have taken the trouble to write a readable novel, at least his imagination would not have skipped in such an unaccountable manner from studies of high life ... to studies of low life ... from clear dramatic invention to muddled psychological insight, from the virtues of a clever story-teller to the tricks of a conjurer or a medium. As it is, Harry Richmond is as dull as it is perverse, and the reader's patience breaks down long before the author is tired of inventing new characters, performing fresh feats for incomprehensible motives in a world which is not only unreal but inconsistent.

The modern reader cannot help but feel that the more hostile reviews were the work of men who were not prepared to make an effort to try to understand what Meredith was attempting to say, or to appreciate the means by which he said it, even in the untypical Harry Richmond. If, as L. T. Hergenhan suggests,¹²

10 A contemporary expression of a commonplace of anti-Meredithian criticism, a forerunner of E. M. Forster's comment, "the home counties posing as the universe".

11 December 15, 1871.

12 In "The Reception of George Meredith's Early Novels", Nineteenth Century Fiction, Vol. 9, No. 3, December 1964, pp. 212-236.

"his novels ... offered a challenge to pioneer critics", there were clearly a number who were not prepared to accept the challenge. Hergenhan adds, "... although he may not have shown more originality than his great contemporaries, his originality proved the hardest to appreciate",¹³ and it is clear that for some it was indeed too hard. There were others, however, who could see what was needed: in a percipient appraisal of what it called "a rarely beautiful and highly-finished work of art," the Echo¹⁴ makes an important point:

... Mr. Meredith assumes in his readers a great willingness to work with him, and the possession of no small share of imaginative power.^[15] People who expect to read without trouble, and have everything made plain to them at each step, are not likely ... to find much enjoyment in "The Adventures of Harry Richmond", or any other of this author's works.

The reviewer has already pointed to another major characteristic of Meredith's work, a characteristic which is now seen as one of the most basic components of his style - its

13 Ibid., p. 214.

14 November 10, 1871.

15 The Queen (November 30, 1871) suggested that "Mr. Meredith leaves his mysteries to be cleared up according to the reader's power of imagination, or opinion of probability."

poetic quality.¹⁶ The Echo notice begins,

The most striking quality in this book is its singular beauty, a quality that may seem to belong to a poem rather than to a novel, but, indeed, there is much of the poem about it. Part of the difficulty that is likely to be found in reading it arises from this, that Mr. Meredith has set himself to accomplish in prose what really needs a finer and subtler instrument.^[17] We are throughout strongly reminded of Mr. Browning. There is the same revelling in emotional analysis, and the casuistry of the passions, the same tendency to tell what has to be told by hints and suggestions, and half-utterances, so that there are passages whose meaning is really bewildering till we hit on the key-note, when they at once settle into perfect clearness and harmony.

Four days earlier the Daily News, though by no means as intelligently as the Echo, had drawn its readers' attention to the underlying qualities of Harry Richmond.

... Deep thoughts all aglow with physical colour, an elliptical power of language which is sometimes betrayed into obscurity, cynicism tempered by a large-hearted sympathy with human failure - these are the usual characteristics of Mr. George Meredith's works; but in "Harry Richmond" he has expressed his genius with unwonted clearness, and, under the guise of a romance, has worked out a careful study in moral physiology ... Not a page can be read carelessly; its profound philosophy, its almost excess of subtlety, command attention and generate thought, while the sensitiveness to nature's beauties which vibrate like a passion throughout the work, and the deep under-glow of its human sympathy, complete the attractions of a book in every sense remarkable.

16 cf. Walter Allen, op. cit. pp. 224-5: "... for Meredith his novels were merely one form his poetry took."

17 The common belief in the superiority of poetry succinctly expressed.

This Daily News review is short and inclined to be spoiled by the reviewer's tendency to wordiness, but it is interesting to anyone comparing present and contemporary reactions to Harry Richmond for two reasons: firstly, its assessment of the characters of Richmond Roy and Squire Beltham, and secondly, its realization that something may exist below the surface, as it were, of a novel. No other review expresses its approval of Meredith's ability to create characters as unequivocally as this:

... Mr. Meredith's idea is as original as it is powerfully expressed. He shows in Roy Richmond the canker of hereditary vices unobscured by the splendour of hereditary pride of place. Inheriting a grand manner and a moral nature decayed to the core, he fares ill in the work-a-day world of simple, manly truth and self-relying toil. There is a scenic glamour in him for most women and for many men, but the reader can criticise the tawdry reality and estimate at its full strength the contrast afforded to it by rough Squire Beltham. These two men, differing as rock and quicksand, are the real heroes of the book. As single studies of character each would have been admirable, but brought into direct antagonism they are masterpieces. The vigour of the one delineation never flags, the minute touches that go to make up the other never lose their delicacy.¹⁸

18 Some others speak well of both Roy and Squire Beltham: the Spectator sees them as "unquestionably the great figures of the piece" and sees how powerful is the contrast between Roy's "unreal kind of genius for social magnificence" and the Squire's "solid earthly character"; the Morning Post reviewer sees Squire Beltham as "the Squire Weston of the 19th Century". But the Examiner and the British Quarterly Review are hostile: the former insists that although they may be "sharply cut" or "fairly elaborated and individualised" the characters "are only puppets. They speak and act

If this kind of appreciation of Meredith's powers of characterization is uncommon, the idea that the story could be something more than a mere narrative is even rarer, and "... under the guise of a romance [he] has worked out a careful study in moral physiology" becomes the most interesting sentence in the review. It is possible now for a critic to write a long chapter speculating on the inner meaning of a Meredith novel. A hypothesis such as Norman Kelvin's¹⁹ may or may not be convincing, but the fact that it is put forward as a possible interpretation surprises no one. When Kelvin suggests, for example, that the Princess Ottilia is "a symbol both of Roy's illusory dreams of royalty and of Meredith's idea of perfect femininity",²⁰ he is saying

unnaturally"; while the latter, as one of the voices of Nonconformity, describes Roy as "this selfish schemer, this mad compound of buffoon and Beau Nash, of Micawber and Count Fosco, of sybarite and man of the world", and the chief element of the book as "the infinite absurdity and detestable devilry with which he works out his vast schemes, and goes on his grand parade to perdition." The Daily Telegraph (November 20, 1871) straddles the fence, complaining on the one hand that "the novel teems with persons who ... are impossible in real life" while on the other it concedes that "the picture of Harry's father, scamp and spendthrift and monomaniac though he is, gives unquestionable life to the book."

19 A Troubled Eden, Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith, Edinburgh, 1961. Harry Richmond is analysed in pp. 72-83.

20 Op. cit., p. 76.

something that makes sense for many readers, but he is indulging in the kind of analysis that contemporary reviewers appear to have considered ultra vires. Nor is this to be accounted for simply by the fact that Kelvin is writing a long critical study rather than a short spontaneous review, for it is now taken for granted that if an author is the kind to merit such treatment a newspaper review will discuss the novel behind the novel. A glance at reviews of recent work by, say, William Golding or Iris Murdoch, will confirm this. The absence of this kind of speculation (or even the realization that a novel could have several layers of meaning) seems to be another confirmation of how limited was the general view of prose fiction and the possibilities inherent in it.

The modern reader nevertheless senses in some of the reviews that the writer, facing a work that is, to say the least, much more ambitious, complex, and subtle than the run of the mill novels with which he generally has to deal, is obliged to grope for some way of conveying to the reader his appreciation of something he does not fully comprehend. Thus the Graphic²¹ notice begins with a very telling comparison

21 November 25, 1871, p. 511.

(so much fuller than the usual ones) between painting and writing:

Mr. Meredith's novel reminds us somewhat of Turner's famous picture, "The Fighting Téméraire." Both display much genius and originality while both are alike veiled in a perplexing shadowy mist. On a close inspection we gradually feel the power which lurks under this dim haze, our attention is caught, and that which at first seemed a defect becomes an additional charm. On careful reading "Harry Richmond" we now and again meet with brilliant flashes of wit and humour, a sweet thought, or a splendid landscape in vivid word painting, just as in the picture dashes of fiery colour, and gleaming white streaks of light stand out from the surrounding chaos, and reveal the touch of a "man of mind."

The comparison between the technique of an artist such as Turner and Meredith's method is implied also in another of the Echo's perceptive remarks,

If creation involves the sense of a finished art, he can hardly be said to "create" at all. He does not, after having first firmly grasped his conceptions, set them forth outside of, and apart from himself, and then trace their action; rather they are continually, so to say, fluent, shifting up as the play of his thought on them brings out fresh aspects.

There seems to be little doubt, however, that Meredith's style was puzzling and difficult. Mr. Stevenson, writing of Harry Richmond in comparison with the rest of Meredith's work, may say that "subtle allusions and devious indirectness had to be avoided" (implying that Meredith succeeded in doing so)

but for many the polite strictures of the sympathetic critic in the Athenæum²² would be closer to the mark:

His method of narrating in short staccato sentences, with an immense number of full stops, joined to his habit of constantly changing his scene ... renders his novels by no means easy reading, if we would understand what is going on, and keep up with the progress of events. He is also fond of exercising his reader's ingenuity by giving only the slightest hint at the real causes of some of the most important events.

The reviewer does find consolation in the fact that "the whole story has taken as coherent shape as any story of Mr. Meredith's is likely to do." Even critics who recognize his genius find difficulties: the writer in Blackwood's,²³ after lavishing compliments on the early part of the book, finds that "the luxuriance of unrestrained imagination runs riot to such an extent that it is difficult to trace out the meaning of the latter half", and finishes:

... the ineffable absurdities of Harry's father, ... run all to seed at the end, and produce such a thicket of incidents and emotions, as it is very difficult for the reader to force his way through. But this thicket is everywhere bright with strange bits of description, with gleams of insight and quaint clever sayings, such as afford a pleasant clue to the reader, by means of which he can guide himself out and in of the labyrinth. It is not a novel in the legitimate three-volume sense of the word, but it is a very odd and very clever book.

22 November 4, 1871.

23 June 1872.

The Westminster Review,²⁴ finding itself in similar difficulties, avoids the issue altogether in a shower of pleasant words:

Mr. Meredith has long since won a recognised position in literature. Whatever he writes ... is distinctively marked by real genius. He possesses in no ordinary degree insight into character, humour and wit, descriptive power, and lastly real poetical feeling ... [but] criticism in Mr. Meredith's case is always difficult. But in "Harry Richmond" the difficulty is doubled ... Whilst we are reading, we are fascinated and spell-bound. It is not until we have closed the book, and the spell has lost some of its charm, that we feel ourselves to be critically inclined. Criticism, especially of the cold-blooded kind, would, we fear, make short work of Mr. Meredith's pleasant extravagance. For our own part we are more disposed to call attention to the gay fancies and the wealth of poetry which the author has so freely scattered over his pages.

This matter of "defying criticism" is expressed in many ways, and it is clear that compared with Desperate Remedies, for example, or indeed any of the 27 novels studied in Chapter 1, Harry Richmond is a "difficult" book for the reviewers. There is no reason to suppose that Meredith was surprised by this uncertainty on their part; compared with Hardy he was well-versed in the ways of reviewers. He had written to Morley in January, 1870,²⁵ "As to 'Harry Richmond', I fear I am evolving his personality too closely for the

24 January 1872.

25 W. M. Meredith, ed., Letters of George Meredith, London, 1912, p. 204.

public, but a man must work by the light of his conscience if he's to do anything worth reading." It should be remembered that Meredith described his own position in an aside to the reader in Beauchamp's Career (1876) as follows:

My way is like a Rhone island in a summer drought, stony, unattractive and difficult; between the two forceful streams of the unreal and the over-real, which delight mankind - honour to the conjurers.²⁶

It is clear nevertheless that many reviewers expected, indeed took for granted, straightforwardness in a novel, and if they were disappointed in this expectation they said so: "it would be far truer to say that it has the stuff for half-a-dozen first-rate novels in it, than that it is a first-rate novel itself"²⁷ or "It is quite worth reading; but it is itself a sketch in three volumes, in spite of the extraordinary minuteness of description"²⁸ or "Mr. Meredith sets at defiance all ordinary rules of composition, and indulges in the wildest vagaries of plot-making"²⁹ or "[it is] neither good, bad, nor indifferent. The reader is alternately tempted to throw it away and allured to read on; and in the

26 Cf. Phyllis Bartlett, George Meredith, London, 1963, p. 20.

27 Spectator.

28 Athenaeum.

29 Examiner.

end most of those who reach the dénouement will be disposed to say that they wished they had yielded to the first temptation."³⁰

It seems reasonable to suggest that, in spite of his awareness of how much out of step he was, Meredith would have much more justification for resentment at some of the reviews of Harry Richmond than had Hardy at any of those for Desperate Remedies. It has been seen that, for the most part, the reception of the latter was fair and reasonable; and in the light of recent criticism the reader does not feel that great injustice was done to the book, even by the Spectator. In Meredith's case, however, there is a great discrepancy between modern intelligent opinion, and much contemporary reaction. This can be demonstrated by comparing the last paragraph of Walter Allen's essay on him, with further extracts from the Spectator. Mr. Allen writes:

Wit and poetry exist side by side, and each irradiates the other. It is this combination that gives Meredith his special place in the novel. In the history of the novel, however, it is the poetry that is important. A mind come suddenly to obscure consciousness of itself, trembling on the verge of half-apprehended self-discovery, can be shown directly only through poetry.

30 Daily Telegraph.

Meredith is the first master of this kind of poetry in the English novel, and in this respect he stands behind Henry James, ... D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and later novelists ...³¹

In the Spectator the reviewer, while conceding that Ottilia is "a beautiful picture, full of clear intellectual grace and tender intensity" and that Richmond Roy and Squire Beltham are "unquestionably the great figures of the book", has this to say about the hero and heroine:

... the little sympathy we have with the hero ... who is the connecting-thread of the whole, and who, instead of making us feel eager about his future, is always giving us a foretaste of something uncomfortable and embarrassing, destroy our interest in the development.

As for [Janet], we never know her well enough to feel any interest in the development of ... a curiously self-contained and sedate affection ... her love for the hero is so very imperfectly painted, that it is hardly possible to feel any sympathy with her till within a very few pages of the close.

Thus Harry Richmond ... being radically uninteresting, and his career full of moral awkwardnesses ... and as the story of neither of the heroines ... supplies in any degree the predominant fascination in which he himself is so deficient, we are left to the extraordinary cleverness of the conceptions of the tale itself to supply the want of current in the plot.

... the book has great faults. There is a great exuberance of dull, protracted, social intrigue, and a terrible flatness about the hero himself. But worst

31. Op. cit., p. 232.

of all is the want of simplicity of style ... which tend[s] to spoil a novel containing the evidence of really great powers.³²

L. T. Hergenhan in an article describing the contemporary assessment of "Meredith's Attempts to Win Popularity,"³³ accounts for the widespread dissatisfaction in this way:

Reviewers failed to understand that the unifying interest of the novel was to be found not in action but in theme, which unites the most far-flung and apparently arbitrary episodes and gives them substance and depth ...

... Harry Richmond differs from Meredith's other novels in that the detailed evidence of the protagonist's development is dispersed throughout a narrative of adventure, and must be inferred and pieced together by an attentive reader. The changing style which was meant to reflect Harry's growth was a subtlety that went unappreciated.

32 Of this criticism Sassoon writes (op. cit., p. 107): "Hutton, it seems, was a prime example of those minds in which Meredith creates antipathy while they are compelled to admit his great gifts. And when people dislike Meredith it is useless to argue with them. All his obvious faults rise up and become the allies of their animosity. Hutton was one of those fair-minded and able literary men who can be relied on to write admirably about anyone who has been canonised as a classic. Such men should avoid taking risks with contemporary talents." R. H. Hutton in addition to being editor of the Spectator, was also, after 1876, the reviewer of Hardy's novels.

33 Studies in English Literature, Vol. IV, No. 4, pp. 637-651.

Also, it was not realized that the often kaleidoscopic scene-changes help to capture the actual process of Harry's memory as it moves more freely and selectively than that of the usual autobiographer of Victorian fiction. ...

The reviews ... suggest that even sophisticated Victorian readers had become so used to being guided along a smooth narrative path that they sometimes placed too much value on straightforward, detailed narration. Meredith was the first novelist seriously to challenge this ingrained attitude and to demand added effort from his readers.

It may well be that for many reviewers Meredith was ahead of his times. They were not used to finding in novels the kind of rigorous analysis that Meredith believed the novel to be capable of sustaining: "You must feed on something", he wrote in the prelude to Diana of the Crossways; "Matter that is not nourishing to brains can help to constitute nothing but the bodies which are pitched on rubbish-heaps. Brainstuff is not lean stuff; the brainstuff of fiction is internal history, and to suppose it dull is the profoundest of errors." It appears that digestions which had had to cope with the standard Victorian novels were hardly prepared to relish this more meaty diet.

* * * * *

ii. A Princess of Thule

A section on William Black will not be complicated, as those on other authors have been, by a comparison between the

contemporary and the modern reactions to his work: there is no modern reaction. His name is now virtually unknown; his books on the shelves of second-hand booksellers, scattered among Blackmore and Besant and Rice, are usually among the cheapest in the shop: he receives little attention even in Baker's History, and when Sir Paul Harvey says in the very brief entry in the Oxford Companion to English Literature that he is "remembered for some of his novels", a student of this generation is bound to ask "By whom?" His sun had set even thirty years ago for in essays written by men of the next generation he was given short shrift. Forrest Reid excluded him from his essay on "Minor Fiction of the 'Eighties" on the grounds that "the descriptions of sunsets provided so liberally and conscientiously ... created absolutely no impression on my mind, because, I think they created very little upon his,"³⁴ and Hugh Walpole dismissed him with a sneer:

Black was open-air and breezy. But oh! the thinness of the tale, the conventionality of the characters, the stale moral background of the parable! ...[*]
That gigantic salmon is the hero of most of William Black's novels.³⁵

34 The Eighteen-Eighties, Cambridge, 1930, p. 108.

* An excerpt from McLeod of Dare follows.

35 The Eighteen-Seventies, Cambridge, 1929, pp. 39-40.

The oblivion into which Black has settled is all but complete, yet in his day he was a respected and greatly admired author as well as a much-loved figure in the literary world. He earns the distinction of a place in Mrs. Leavis' bestsellers list, "The Outline of Popular Fiction",³⁶ which is more than Hardy does, and this present study unearthed more reviews for him than for the novels of Trollope or Meredith or James. Not only that, but all sixteen reviews are the kind that bring joy to a writer's heart: there is not one that is less than an extended compliment, and for every reviewer who brings himself to express some reservation or express some doubt, there is another ready with a eulogy. Phrases such as "the art in which he excels", "Mr. Black's well-merited fame" and "a work of singular power and delicacy" abound. Although they may have warmed Black's heart and sold his books, such phrases make the modern reader conscious of how limited was the reviewers' grasp of the possibilities of fiction and how meagre was their critical vocabulary.

Reading reviews of Black and of others who have vanished from the scene undoubtedly helps to confirm the case of those

36 Fiction and the Reading Public, London, 1932, p. 334, with A Daughter of Heth.

who would dismiss periodical reviewing at this time as of little value; yet it has also the effect of making the modern reader feel that there was a double standard and that when the book was 'easy' - as A Princess of Thule undoubtedly is - the reviewer did not trouble to extend himself, whereas a 'difficult' novel - and even Far from the Madding Crowd is 'difficult' compared with Black - would either call forth a bigger effort to understand and criticize or would occasion the employing of a better reviewer.

That A Princess of Thule is a good story is undeniable: the plot is easy to follow, the pages are easy to read, the characters are easy to like. Even for today's sophisticated novel-reading public it would have many charms, and it has a good deal more to commend it, both in the way it is written and in the movement of plot and delineation of character, than many a present-day equivalent - a 'family drama' on the television. There is nothing to suggest that Black's ambitions were high nor that he had any designs for using the novel to express any philosophy or recommend any way of life other than what might be regarded as a normal one. The modern reader has much less difficulty in understanding Black than in understanding the effusions of his admirers. Even now, though, it is possible to appreciate with what relief a reader would turn to something

with "the freshness and sweetness and perfect sense of natural beauty"³⁷ of this simple story.

A Princess of Thule was Black's eighth novel. It had been followed by readers of Macmillan's Magazine during the summer of 1873³⁸ with the especial keenness that is due to a writer who had in successive years written novels that had been enormous popular successes.³⁹ Black had first come to the notice of the general public as recently as 1869 with the publication of In Silk Attire, but already, as the Queen⁴⁰ pointed out, he had "within a very few years established a niche of his own among our foremost writers of fiction, [so that] any new work from his pen is sure to find its way speedily into successive editions." He had won particular favour for his portrayal of Scottish life and for his charming heroines; A Princess of Thule brought more of both.

The plot is simple. Sheila Mackenzie lives with her widowed father on an island of the Hebrides, of which he is

37 Pall Mall Gazette, January 7, 1874.

38 The book edition came out in late November 1873, but the date on the title-page is 1874.

39 A Daughter of Heth in 1871, and The Strange Adventures of a Phæton in 1872.

40 January 24, 1874.

the laird. Edward Ingram, an old friend of the family, arrives on holiday with his artist friend Frank Lavender who is quickly won by Sheila's beauty and grace, woos her, and takes her to London as his bride. In the city Sheila is saddened and subdued, so that instead of the dazzling princess he had won she now seems to Frank to be merely a dull companion and an awkward hostess; as a result he turns his attentions elsewhere. When he insults a cousin whom she has brought to London to keep her company, Sheila leaves him, first staying with Lavender's aunt and then returning with her father to the Western Isles. Lavender is mortified, goes into a self-imposed exile on Jura, and after learning there to paint finer pictures than he had ever been capable of before, feels that a reconciliation is possible. The pair are restored to one another and resolve henceforth to live six months of the year in the Hebrides and six months in London.

This is a story that, for the reader of the 'seventies "had everything". Judging by the prominence that the reviewers give to the point - many of them remark on it in their opening sentences - one of its greatest merits was its "novelty". "There is an originality", writes the Court Circular⁴¹ "... which in these days of novels which are all

41 December 13, 1873.

copies of each other is most welcome"; it was clearly just the thing for "all jaded novel-readers"⁴² "sated with the constantly repeated scenes of London or provincial life".⁴³ "At last we have a novel worth reading"⁴⁴ is a sentiment that finds an echo in every review, giving the whole collection something of a festive note.

First among the book's virtues is Sheila Mackenzie herself, "one of the most fascinating women Mr. Black has ever sketched";⁴⁴ all the critics find her appealing in one way or another and recommend her to their readers. None does so more overwhelmingly than the reviewer in the Spectator;⁴⁵ indeed, it would be difficult to conceive more rhapsodical praise than the opening of his notice:

We feel as loath to touch this exquisite story with the finger of criticism, as we are to enter any chamber of thought or imagination hallowed by some sacred talent that may brighten and be glorified by the glance of reverence and joy, but shrinks away before the coarser scrutiny and disturbing profanation of a too inquisitive investigation. Sheila must needs suffer at the hands of the most tender and gentle critic. How can we transcribe the nimbus

42 Athenaeum, December 6, 1873.

43 Westminster Review, January 1874.

44 Vanity Fair, December 13, 1873.

45 January 24, 1874.

around her head; or paint the light and love that look from her brave and gentle eyes; or record the deep sincerity and winning earnestness of her sweet voice? No words can describe the majesty which comes more of the abiding presence of simple rectitude than of commanding figure, or the beauty which is more the radiance of a self-forgetful sympathy - almost divine in its great comprehensiveness - than loveliness of form or colour, or the grace that springs rather from an absolute simplicity of thought and manner and perfect following of nature, than from classic outlines, however perfect. Sheila must be known to be admired. If we call her beautiful, to beauty some will add in imagination the smile of the coquette; to dignity, the look of hauteur; to grace, the movements of self-consciousness; to practicality, common-placeness; to high principle, a glance of scorn or contempt; to sincerity, rudeness; to gentleness, an expression of weakness; to love, the abandonment of passion. But Sheila has all these charms and none of these defects; she is as perfect as a woman can be, even in fiction; and altogether without that colourless, level impassibleness which is so necessary an attribute of the perfect heroines of ordinary authors. We are, therefore, unable to give any sketch of Sheila; her life must be read, and she must dawn and rise gradually upon the consciousness of the reader to her perfect day.⁴⁶

No other writer was to such an extent carried away by Sheila's perfection, but there is hardly a review that does not say how much she is to be admired, and some add more virtues to the list, referring to her "womanly obedience",⁴⁷

46 I have included this description in its fulsome entirety because it seemed to me a memorial to Victorian womanhood worth preserving: it describes, in a way that nobody now would have the presumption to attempt, "the perfect woman", and it does so in a style that seems almost the apotheosis of "fine writing" of the time.

47 Athenaeum.

her "high-mindedness",⁴⁸ "the graces of simplicity and high feeling",⁴⁷ and her "wisdom and bravery".⁴⁹ The Guardian,⁵⁰ in a sentence, makes the list still longer:

She is, in short, a perfect child of nature, with a powerful mind lodged in a vigorous as well as beautiful body, and an ignorance of evil which enables her to act and speak with the most unembarrassed freedom.

Not all the reviewers can give their unqualified praise for the way in which the "portrait" has been painted by Black⁵¹ but none of them seems to have any fault to find

48 Examiner, January 31, 1874.

49 Graphic, December 27, 1873.

50 January 21, 1874 - the review comes between The Poor of New York, and Twenty Years' Work among Them, and Five Books of St. Irenaeus against Heresies, translated by the Rev. John Keble.

51 Three reviewers express reservations. The Pall Mall Gazette finds that there is "something shadowy" about her, "more ... a person who has been described ... than [one] with whom we have actually become acquainted"; the Graphic regards her as "a much more ambitious 'study'" and feels that it "cannot fully understand her ... we fail to get that impression of her rare and supreme excellence which ... it is Mr. Black's aim to create in us"; and the Academy (January 17, 1874) goes so far as to ask "Has the writer ever known a Sheila? ... The fact seems to be that Mr. Black was anxious to create a character more original and poetical than the materials supplied by his knowledge of human nature could quite suggest; and that, instead of inventing the missing features and connecting links, he left the space for them blank, trusting that the omission would pass unnoticed, or be unconsciously supplied by the reader, or charitably accounted for as a deliberate representation of the truth that people may fail to understand the character of their nearest and dearest friends."

with the subject, for she is, as the Morning Post⁵² says, "a very model of a pure and good woman".

The picture of Sheila is made all the more attractive because she stands in such sharp contrast to two things that nearly all the reviewers seem to despise: her husband, and London life. The Pall Mall Gazette describes the latter as

the wearisome round of pleasure that is no pleasure, and of social duties that must be gone through which are a nuisance to everybody concerned;

the Athenaeum pities Sheila because she is "cut off from her practical usefulness [and] dulled and subdued to conformity with a thousand requirements of an unknown social code" and remembers how in her native heath the "natural relations have not been confused ... by the assumptions and vulgarities which mar more complicated societies." The Queen also recognizes how Sheila's experiences "afford the author excellent opportunity for contrasting the artificial life of town with the healthy simplicity of northern character and manners."

The contrast with Lavender puts Sheila in an even better light. He is seen from the beginning not only as an unworthy

52 January 2, 1874. The review occupies two whole columns.

member of his noble profession,⁵³ but also as unworthy of his bride. In the first place he has gone "astray in his estimate of the comparative values of Sheila and himself",⁵⁴ and then has done her the wrong of investing her with

an ideal charm as the noble savage or heroine of romance, the beautiful exotic which, when transplanted by his care to more cultured regions, is to flourish and render him, as its proud possessor and inventor, an object of the admiration and envy of fashionable and artistic circles.⁵⁴

Small wonder that he is seen as "little better than a polished cad".⁵⁴ After "his vanity is mortified rather than flattered"⁵⁵ and he has "had the bad taste to be ashamed of her"⁵⁴ and Sheila has left him, the moralists among the reviewers come into their own, and by their choice of words indicate their judgment of Lavender's past behaviour. Since he has been "culpably neglectful [of his] caged wild bird"⁵⁶ he is "properly punished".⁵⁷ The reader witnesses "the katharsis of the worldly-minded Mr. Lavender"⁵⁸ after his

53 "A natty artist, familiar, in the facile amateur way, with all the shibboleths of culture and the fashionable stand-points in matters intellectual and social" (Athenaeum). "A man of genius spoiled by his popularity and social powers" (Spectator).

54 Athenaeum.

55 Morning Post.

56 Daily Telegraph, December 25, 1873.

57 Guardian.

58 Examiner.

"brave and humble submission to chastisement",⁵⁹ and "by a course of self-denying and vigorous work"⁶⁰ he has acquired the "manly courage"⁵⁹ that will entitle him to "reclaim his prize",⁶⁰ "the esteem and love of his wife".⁵⁹

The astonishing review in the Spectator feels almost as strongly about the moral to be learned from Lavender's behaviour as it does about the magnitude of Sheila's goodness, and it goes so far as to suggest that Black's work will have a practical effect:

Nothing we have ever read before made us feel so keenly the extravagant presumptuousness of a young man's passion ... [Mr. Black] will have suggested to many a generous man, if it be not worth his while to consider whether he will not choose his wife with at least some thought for the happiness of those she leaves behind, and with some reference to her own habits and tastes and cherished associations.

Sheila and Lavender are not the only striking characters in the book; indeed, one reviewer or another finds every character worthy of commendation, from Sheila's father (who "ought to have an enduring and recognized existence in fiction"⁶¹) down to the gillie, and even Mrs. Lorraine the young American widow towards whom Lavender turns his attention.

59 Spectator.

60 Graphic.

61 Globe, December 10, 1873.

"Those who like novels of character will be amply gratified by this tale";⁶² "Mr. Black must have studied human nature under its different disguises ...",⁶³ and the book is "full of fine character-rendering".⁶⁴

The other major feature of the book that wins praise from literally every reviewer is Black's famous ability to describe the scenery of the north of Scotland. It would be tedious to present the long series of references to "the painter's eye and the poet's pen"⁶⁵ but there is, all the same, a remarkable variety of complimentary phrases available to these admirers; the Guardian, however, provides the best summary:

We see, as we read, the waste of ocean sleeping in the sunshine or tossing tumultuously upon the broken rocks - we hear the wind sighing through the long nights over the barren uplands, we almost scent the fresh sea air, and feel the keen exhilaration of its wintry blasts. The Hebrides live before us, swept by their own wild skies ...

Some reviewers feel that their own words are inadequate to express Black's power, and incorporate excerpts from his descriptions

62 Athenaeum.

63 Morning Post.

64 British Quarterly Review, January 1874.

65 Daily Telegraph.

of the highland landscape, but none approaches in enthusiasm the enraptured critic in the Spectator who quotes almost a thousand words at the end of the review following this modest introduction:

But let us give in Mr. Black's own words of genius a few little scraps of his sketches of dawn and early morning and day and moonlight and a passing storm, and there leave his never-to-be-forgotten tale.

The writer in the Court Circular prophesied that "among the novels of the season we feel certain there will be none more popular than this", and there is corroboration enough in the other reviews to indicate that he was safe in his prediction. Even those like Edith Simcox in the Academy and Franz Hueffer in the Examiner who have some reservations, are almost apologetic about their criticism:

It is ungrateful to complain because what is after all nearly or quite the best novel of the past year is not ideally perfect in design and form; but Mr. Black's merits are of a quality particularly intolerant of the companionship of imperfection.⁶⁶

[Although] the occasion of [the] crisis we think utterly inadequate and unwarrantable from a psychological point of view ... we fully admit the

66 Academy: the complaint is over the unfinished quality of the portrait of Sheila.

psychological truth and beauty of this solution ...
[We] hail with joy the great success the 'Princess
of Thule' has met with.⁶⁷

There is every reason why the book should be a great success: not only does it have the features that have been dealt with at length above but it exhibits every possible virtue a novelist in the 'seventies could exhibit. While "it rests wholly on sentiment"⁶⁸ there is "not a trace of common-place sentimentality";⁶⁹ it is "perfectly pure and wholesome"⁷⁰ with "not one extravagant incident [nor] one overdrawn character";⁷¹ it has "the all-brightening thread of humour glimmering out now and then [and] a subdued sense of fun"⁷² and yet "no one can read [it] without benefit ... [for it is] a moral lesson".⁷³ The descriptions of the scenery are good, but so are "the fishing expeditions, the love-making, the toddy drinking, and the sketching parties", all of which are "capitally pourtrayed".⁷⁴ And it is

67 Examiner: the inadequacy referred to is the use of the quarrel over the insult to Sheila's cousin as the provocation for her leaving Lavender.

68 Guardian.

69 Globe.

70 Court Circular.

71 Daily Telegraph.

72 British Quarterly Review.

73 Westminster Review.

74 Echo, December 10, 1873.

"entirely free from the half-French jargon and the melodramatic effects of modern sensational fiction."⁷⁵

Is it any wonder, then, that the Globe should praise Black's "sincere and undeviating loyalty to the best principles of the art in which he excels" or that the Morning Post should believe that "seldom has a more graceful and pathetic romance been written" and the Telegraph "defy the united powers of all the most transcendental romancist [sic] to produce a more beautiful and touching tale"? Black was a hero because, as the Echo reminded its readers,

It is the best side of the modern English novelist which becomes prominent in him. He is not one of those writers, now so common, who aspire to be small Dickenses and who settle down into third-rate imitators. Neither is he of those who are in a frenzy to pick up as many curious characters as possible, and who fill their pages with the oddities of humanity. He is a really great pictorial novelist; one of the few in whom a turn for description does not become a positive nuisance; one of the few in whom the adjuncts of a story are not painfully exaggerated.

It may seem small praise but it clearly made all the difference between very great success and the struggle for recognition that must have been the lot of hundreds of Black's fellow-writers.

The reviews of Black's most successful novels serve to remind the modern reader that by the standards of the ordinary

75 Examiner.

fiction of the time, Hardy was not as good as he might have been. The lists of virtues to be found in Black are longer than those to be found in Hardy, and so long as they were being judged by the same standards, it is not to be wondered at that some of Hardy's novels were poorly received.

A Princess of Thule provides the context in which to judge the reception of, for example, The Return of the Native, and to overlook this is to run the risk of rendering invalid any assessment of Hardy's reputation in his own time.

* * * * *

iii. Workers in the Dawn

The reviews that followed the publication of Workers in the Dawn reveal a rather unexpected connection between Gissing and Hardy, for there are times during a reading of these reviews when the student of Hardy feels that he might be reading a criticism of Hardy's first (unpublished) novel rather than Gissing's. When the Examiner⁷⁶ says "It would have been better for him, perhaps, if he had never published 'Workers in the Dawn' at all", there is an echo of Meredith's advice to Hardy to put aside The Poor Man and the Lady.

76 July 17, 1880:

Similarly the passage in the Life⁷⁷ that gives a detailed account of Meredith's criticism contains a sentence which might be borrowed, word for word, from an account of Gissing:

... He strongly advised its author 'not to nail his colours to the mast' so definitely in a first book, if he wished to do anything practical in literature: for if he printed so pronounced a thing he would be attacked on all sides by the conventional reviewers, and its future injured. The story was, in fact, a sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church restoration, and political and domestic morals in general, the author's views, in fact, being obviously those of a young man with a passion for reforming the world ... the tendency of the writing being socialistic, not to say revolutionary ...

There are other parallels - the theme of Macmillan's letter to Hardy about the upper class characters in the book,⁷⁸ and the way in which the quality of the writing varies depending on the extent to which the author had himself been involved in, or a witness to, the scenes he describes - but it is well perhaps not to stretch the point too far. The

77 p. 61.

78 Quoted in Weber, op. cit., p. 65. "I don't know what opportunities you have had of seeing the class you deal with. My own experience of fashionables is very small ... but it is inconceivable to me that any considerable number of human beings ... should be so bad ..."

reception of Workers in the Dawn is interesting enough to stand on its own, although the recollection of the fate of The Poor Man and the Lady gives an added dimension to this consideration of how another first attempt was received by the critics.⁷⁹

The difficulty Gissing had in finding a publisher doubtless made it clear to him that a very favorable reception from the critics was unlikely, and he may well have had the fortitude to bear the very hostile reviews. He could not for a moment have thought that he would escape castigation, considering the attacks he was levelling against so many of the established opinions and assumptions of the day. By the same token, however, he must also have been pleasantly surprised at the warmth of the admiration to be found in several of the notices. He may well have been more prepared for such sneers as "the whole is as feeble a history of

79 There is, of course, no likelihood that Gissing knew of Hardy's willingness to bow to the judgment of others and to suppress his first novel, but to a man like Gissing, whose determination to have Workers in the Dawn published had cost him almost all he had, it might have seemed like "selling out". According to Jacob Korg (George Gissing, A Critical Biography, London, 1965, p. 204), Gissing "found fault with [Hardy] for cultivating his social superiors". Perhaps the two things have something to do with what Gissing would have regarded as a lack of integrity on Hardy's part, the thing that together with his repulsion at Hardy's coarseness led to his aversion for him.

nauseous people and unsavory things as can well be"⁸⁰ - than for such compliments as that in George Saintsbury's review for the Academy:⁸¹ "He possesses sincerity, which is a great thing, and imagination, which is a greater."

There were far more brickbats than bouquets, and the fact that as many as nine London periodicals reviewed this first attempt may be taken as a doubtful advantage, considering that the tone of so much of the reviewing was unfriendly and unsympathetic. It is small wonder that only forty-nine copies of the book were sold in the first three months, or that Gissing's share of the first year's sales amounted to only sixteen shillings.⁸²

There is something Dickensian in the scope of Workers in the Dawn, and Gissing's debt to Dickens has often been noted,⁸³ but some of the most admirable qualities in Dickens, the complexity of his plots and the large number of characters

80 World, October 6, 1880.

81 July 31, 1880.

82 Korg, op. cit., p. 43.

83 There is a fairly detailed account of this aspect of Workers in the Dawn in Mabel Collins Donnelly, George Gissing, Grave Comedian, Cambridge, Mass., 1954, p. 66.

that they demand, are the very things which in Gissing expose his weaknesses and inexperience and leave him open to attack on numerous grounds. The plot itself, or at least the "overcrowding of incident", leads to one of the complaints in the Morning Post:⁸⁴

So many different threads have to be gathered up in order to restore something like order to the tangled skein of circumstance that the reader becomes perfectly bewildered, and, in perpetually looking back to recover the clue to the action of one of the characters, loses it as regards another.

For other reviewers it is the simplicity of Gissing's ideas rather than the complexity of his plot that is irritating; George Saintsbury observes how

He has got into his head the very common notion that social order as at present established is the root of all evil, and he writes a long (a very long) novel to illustrate this notion

and goes on to draw attention to what he considers one of the book's most vulnerable weaknesses:

Nearly all his people of the upper class are foolish or wicked, and nearly all those of the lower are wretched and wronged.

The Athenaeum⁸⁵ takes up this lack of subtlety in Gissing and points out to him why this is damaging to the effectiveness of

84 September 11, 1880.

85 June 12, 1880.

his argument as well as to the structure of his novel,

He has fallen into the error, common to most polemical novelists, of making the horns and tail of his bête noire so very grotesque as to take from the seriousness of the contest. To make the enemy so weak as to exclude the possibility of comparison with the friend ... only outrages the reader's common sense, and gives him reason to suspect that argument has been wisely avoided.

The reviewer goes on to put this weakness down to "social inexperience" and "the ardour of a novice".

Emphasis on Gissing's inexperience as a writer, however, is not very strong; few reviewers put much stress on the fact that this is a first novel, and explicit advice to the fledgling writer is proffered by only one or two of them. The Morning Post suggests that he would be wise "to devote serious study to the construction of his plot, and to practice simplicity of language"; but advice from the others has to be inferred from their analysis of what they find admirable in the book. There can be no question but that the most widely admired characteristic is the sincerity and passion that infuse the passages dealing with the life of the London poor. In these almost all the reviewers recognize a writer of very great talent, and their willingness to say as much - often, undoubtedly, in spite of a certain revulsion against much of what Gissing describes - does them credit and contrasts

strongly with the handful who have nothing to offer but sneers:

The hero ... casts his wife on the streets, and then desires to marry another woman ... The story would treat of high life and low. Its pictures of the former are untrue and vulgar, and of the latter unnecessarily coarse and profane.⁸⁶

... a novel ... which seems intended to expose the evils of irreligion and drunkenness, but is rather tiresome reading. Most of the characters die in great agony and distress; and ... the reader will accept the fact with equanimity. It is seldom that a series of less amusing puppets have been exhibited on the fictional stage.⁸⁷

Phrases taken from a number of reviews will indicate how Gissing's intensity of feeling made its impact upon even unsympathetic reviewers: "a certain rough eloquence",⁸⁸ "fluency of study, much power of vituperation, and an honest partisanship",⁸⁹ "as vigorous and faithful studies as they well could be",⁹⁰ "much more like life".⁹¹ The fact is that even when a reviewer finds the book "intensely wearisome", as

86 World.

87 Whitehall Review, July 15, 1880.

88 Daily News, July 29, 1880.

89 Athenaeum.

90 Examiner.

91 Court Circular, June 19, 1880.

the Court Circular critic does, he seems bound to pay tribute to the author for the effectiveness of those passages that meet the first and foremost requirements of the Victorian novel-reader - sincerity and truthfulness. The reviewers always liked the man who could write clearly about something he knew well: Gissing's East End scenes are singled out in the same way and for the same reasons as are Hardy's Wessex descriptions.

Some reviewers are able to see that there is more to Gissing's power than the ability of an involved observer, and though they cannot have known how much of Gissing's actual experience was described in the novel, some of them realize that in places the writer is dealing with events that he had himself lived through, and they are struck by the power that comes into the writing at such points. The Spectator⁹² comes very close to the mark in its assessment of the "description of Carrie, whom the hero marries, in an enthusiasm of pity and love ...":

Her downward career, and the impossibility of evoking a spark of sustained effort to resist it, are very strikingly painted, and the effect produced on Arthur is painfully true to nature. ... we feel we are dealing with real flesh and

92 September 25, 1880.

blood, and not with the mere creation of fancy. Arthur's gradual awakening to the fact that he has married a woman whom it is impossible to raise ... is given with great delicacy and skill.

It is true that the Spectator goes into detail more than other reviews, but it was not alone in seeing that some parts of the book have unusual power: Saintsbury after referring to Gissing's sincerity and imagination remarks that "his book leaves on the mind a certain 'obsession' ... which merely insignificant work never produces"; the Morning Post points out that

when Mr Gissing will condescend to restrain himself to matters of humble life it is evident that he is writing from true and painful experience, and the result is that such portions of his work are very superior to any others ...;

and the Court Circular goes so far as to suggest that "Mr Gissing would do better to give us a story wholly about workmen ... [he] knows the ugly side of that life well enough."

It was Gissing's misfortune that the eloquence of the most compelling parts of his novel forced his readers' attention to dwell upon the least acceptable subject-matter, and it is this particular combination of attraction and repulsion (not unknown, by any means, among readers of Hardy) that troubled the reviewers as much as anything. The Morning Post followed the compliment quoted in the previous

paragraph with the qualifying remark, "it may be doubted whether the pages of a novel are the most suitable vehicle for the introduction of such topics as the prevalent vices of a great city." The Spectator reviewer is similarly troubled:

... there is no doubt that Workers in the Dawn is a very powerful work. So powerful are its best parts, that they amply make amends for the ludicrous ignorance and deep-seated prejudice displayed [in the worst] ... Unfortunately, it is the world of poverty and misery, and the dark side of human nature, with which Mr Gissing is best acquainted. Vice, with the dire effect it produces on human beings ... when generation after generation lives and dies without a hope, or even a wish for anything better, is drawn with terrible reality.

Something similar forms the main burden of the brief review in the Examiner, which sees this new author as one who "evidently wishes to rank as a British Emile Zola, with a stronger touch of morality", for it is clear that although Gissing gives "plenty of good, broad description" there is a danger in too much realism:

A description of a Leicester Square restaurant of the worst class and of the tableaux vivants may succeed as a warning to wickedness, but most of us would not care to take them as drawing-room sermons on morality. ... the fairest criticism ... must be, that it is a curious and unsatisfactory display of undoubted ignorance and undoubted talent ...

Gissing had to contend not only with the reviewers' aversion for descriptions of vicious lives, but also with

their preference for happy outcomes. The Daily News doubtless frightened away many readers by saying that Gissing's tone was "pessimist rather than hopeful" and by suggesting how "the painful nature of many of the scenes, which are described without a touch of ideality, and the tone of bitter frustration over the whole story, make it a sad one." The Spectator observes the same phenomena, but feels that it has the explanation for them:

That the tone of the book should be pessimist, and the end of Arthur despair, is only natural from an author whose creed is atheism, and whose sympathies are keenly alive to the sins and sorrows of the human race. ... Mr Gissing has evidently no idea of the real strength and beauty of Christianity. How little he understands the large part that Christianity has played in the cause of civilisation, or the extent of what it has accomplished in ameliorating the position of the poor, is very evident ...

Considering the certainty with which the Spectator identifies Gissing's atheistic outlook, the verdict of the Morning Post comes as something of a surprise - "There would seem to have been an intention to enforce a serious moral, viz., the danger attending life without religion" - yet even with this satisfaction the reviewer is constrained to deplore the passionate tone of Gissing's writing, complaining that "it is rather a pity that this could not have been done without a rushing into polemics."

The Morning Post and the Whitehall Review (quoted on p. 427 above) are alone however in believing that Gissing's purpose is to show "the dangers of irreligion"; others, like the Court Circular, see "an obtrusive desire to ridicule the Church of England" or, like the Athenaeum, believe that "our author is an enthusiastic subscriber" to the views that the social difficulties of over-population and pauperism may be redressed by rousing the passions of the poor, and ... that religion may be usefully replaced by an amalgam of Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley.

The World detects a scepticism on Gissing's part concerning marriage, but considers the novel so unsuccessful that the institution "is scarcely likely to be brought into contempt".⁹³

93 This confusion on the part of the reviewers - their ability to see in the same book totally different purposes - is referred to in a paragraph in Korg's book (p. 97) where he is dealing with the reception, in 1886, of Demos: "Gissing had always complained about reviews, and the 'mixed' reaction to Demos implanted a lifelong aversion to them in his mind. He asked his publisher not to send him any reviews of his next book ... He often found himself misunderstood, for reviewers missed both his irony and his reticence and attributed to him opinions that he did not hold. ... the fault was often on his side. His indecision about the complex questions he dealt with prevented him from expressing his ideas in his stories in a clear-cut and unambiguous manner. It is not surprising that he found it painful to read the reviews, for they often told him very plainly that he had failed to convey his ideas with precision."

There seems to be little doubt that Gissing, if he considered them at all,⁹⁴ seriously misjudged the readers of his day and the demands he could reasonably make of them. Workers in the Dawn is an exceptionally long book, even in an era of long books, and this in itself is enough to deter more than one reviewer - "three long volumes that contain twice as much print, we will not say matter, as an ordinary three-volume novel ..." ⁹⁵ - but more than that, it is over-ambitious. It is this tendency to want to cover too much ground (some of it unfamiliar) and to tilt at too many windmills, that almost guarantees that every reviewer will find something objectionable in the book. Thus the Court Circular, for example, regrets that "he has plainly not grasped the great principle that a story is bound to be first of all a story ... [rather than] a mere series of events without any organic coherence"; or the Spectator complains

94 It seems clear that Gissing was not unaware of how unusual his book was: in a letter written to his brother soon after the novel appeared, he described it as follows: "The book in the first place is not a novel in the generally-accepted sense of the word, but a very strong (possibly too plain spoken) attack upon certain features of our present religious and social life which to me appear highly condemnable. ... It is not a book for women and children, but for thinking and struggling men." (Quoted by Korg, op. cit., p. 28).

95 Court Circular.

of Gissing's ignorance of the life of the Anglican clergy or the wealthy:

Hardly one line that deals with them is true to nature, and the pictures he draws ... become simple caricatures, and go far to spoil a work that otherwise is very strong indeed. It would have been wiser if the author had kept in bounds a cynicism that refuses to see any good in institutions which he does not understand.⁹⁶

Even when he is writing about something he understands, Gissing exposes himself to the danger of taking his work out of the reach of some influential segments of the novel-reading public: Saintsbury is constrained to observe that

Workers in the Dawn is not exactly intended for the well-known young ladies whose bread is cut in the equally well-known tartines. There is nothing in the least unclean in Mr. Gissing's handling of his subjects, but in the choice of them he is more adventurous than is usual with the English novelist.

A somewhat similar passage in the Athenaeum review is also likely to have ruled the book out of consideration for all but the adventurous reader:

... he has done his subject the justice of sparing no graphic detail of the miseries of the vicious and the poor, and the result is a striking and, let us hope, [97] a useful picture.

96 The Court Circular suggests that "the picture drawn of their way of living is as absurd as a Frenchman's description of an English Sunday".

97 My italics.

The present-day reader cannot help but wonder what changes in society might have been wrought if Gissing had had the genius to limit the scope of his work and, by force of passion combined with judgment, to produce a work that could not be written off so easily. A sentence from one of the reviews indicates the seriousness of the task:

[his] meaning has been to show how much men and women have to strive against who endeavour to rise from social degradation, how little society does to help them, and how unwisely and wrongly that little is done.⁹⁸

It is inevitable, in the light of the general hostility towards Workers in the Dawn, that the student of Hardy should wonder about The Poor Man and the Lady and speculate as to what it contained, how strongly Hardy felt about the institutions he criticized, and why he was so ready (compared with Gissing at least) to set it aside. He must wonder too, when he compares the reception of the two authors' first publications (remembering also that Hardy's was published anonymously), whether Hardy would have had the same fortitude as Gissing had Desperate Remedies been treated as badly as Workers in the Dawn. The fact that Hardy could have considered abandoning a writing career because of the Spectator's strictures suggests what the answer would be. Yet Hardy went on, in the end, to have a far greater influence than Gissing on the moral climate of his time.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been concerned to describe contemporary judgment on the growth of Hardy's reputation as a novelist. The emphasis has been almost exclusively upon periodical reviews of his novels for they provide the only detailed guide to a study of that growth. There are, of course, other indications: the contrast between the search for a publisher in the early days and the publishers' pursuit of Hardy later on is an obvious one; the acceptance into the social life of literary London is another that can be traced in the Life. All that such stories tell, however, is that Hardy achieved success and how fast and in which quarters he achieved it; they say nothing about how it was achieved. For this it is necessary to consider the opinions expressed about his early work by his contemporaries, and among his contemporaries the only ones whose opinions are available to us, apart from a few remarks by his various publishers, are those who put their opinions into print - the reviewers.

The reputation that emerges from the reviews of the first eight novels is not the one that Hardy enjoys today; that much is clear. When the Daily News reviewer says of A Laodicean, "In a word, it is one of Mr. Hardy's stories of English life" he is making the point, unwittingly, that Hardy

is just another writer of novels. The modern reader who wishes to put himself in the place of one of Hardy's early admirers must set aside all thoughts of "Hardy of Wessex", Max Gate, and pilgrimages to Dorset. That the reviewers recognized Hardy's strengths as a delineator of Wessex life is obvious; that they admired his extraordinary ability to describe natural phenomena is clear; but the reviewers were few in number who could see that Hardy's peculiar contribution to the English novel was going to be made in the novels of Wessex rather than in the others.

The other knowledge that the modern reader must put on one side has to do with the effect upon the reading public of the four great novels published between 1886 and 1896. This means that he must forget about both the scandal created by Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, and the dissatisfaction with the growing tendency towards tragedy and pessimism. Not to do this is to risk making the mistake of remembering the fates of Tess and Jude and arguing that Hardy's career is all of a piece, that Desperate Remedies was a failure because it was a dirty book and Under the Greenwood Tree a success because it was not, or that The Return of the Native was unpopular because it has a tragic, or at least gloomy, ending, while The Trumpet-Major

was liked because it did not. There is some truth in all four of these statements, but it is only a part of the truth.

The fact is that what this study shows is how 'ordinary' Hardy was at this stage of his career and yet how good. It is precisely because the reviewers see him as an ordinary novelist that they can recognize his extraordinary gifts; and it is because of the praise he received (and it must be emphasized how much praise there is) for these ordinary novels, and the money and security that accompanied the praise, that he was encouraged and enabled to continue to write until he was, in the later books, an extraordinary novelist.

To speak of the early Hardy as an 'ordinary' novelist is not to underestimate his originality; review after review during these early years refers to the unusualness of his settings, to the novelty of many of his characters, to the attractive unfamiliarity of many of his heroines. The important thing that emerges, however, is that, in these years, this originality was seen within the context of Hardy's membership in the "modern-romantic" school.¹ It is that that makes it possible for a reviewer to see The Hand of Ethelberta as the same kind of book as Far from the Madding Crowd. The point is that Hardy is praised by most of the

1 Athenaeum review of The Hand of Ethelberta, p. 180 above.

critics not because he is writing extraordinary novels - the comparisons with George Eliot, as has been seen, are not only all made in one direction, but are almost all concerned with comparatively trivial matters - not because he is writing 'literature', but because among the writers of ordinary books he is one who gives very great pleasure.

He gives this pleasure to the greatest extent when he is able to combine his peculiar originality with the satisfaction of the ordinary demands of the ordinary reader. There is every indication that Hardy's ambition lay no higher than that at this point in his career. It was because he wanted no more than to be considered "a good hand at a serial" that he was so willing to listen to advice and criticism. Meredith suggests a novel with a plot and Desperate Remedies is the result; Morley and two or three reviewers praise the rustic scenes in it and Hardy revives and completes Under the Greenwood Tree; praise for his plot-making, and perhaps some lukewarmness over the uneventfulness of that novel, help to produce A Pair of Blue Eyes; the unhappy ending brings distress and so Far from the Madding Crowd allows the patient hero to win the handsome heroine in the end; and the list could be extended partly by speculation, but mainly by observation. The body of the

thesis has called attention to some few guesses of how particular criticisms of details may have provoked specific reactions - the use of unusual ~~and~~ proper names for example. There is a good case for suggesting that it is only after being confused by the inconsistency and variety of criticisms (after being taken to task for repetition, for example, he attempts to show his versatility, only to be told to stick to what he knows best) that Hardy was able to decide not to heed the critics, even if he could not ignore their criticisms.

The picture that emerges from these hundreds of reviews is that of a writer whose reputation is made quite early in his career (the reception of A Pair of Blue Eyes is surely of considerable significance) but whose early work as well as early reputation is, apart from the one aberration of The Return of the Native (small wonder it confused the critics), something quite different from the novels with which he was to end his career. It is, for example, rather like studying Goya's work without reference to the "Black" paintings. It also explains, or helps to explain, the lack of appreciation of the four last, great, novels: the study of the reception of the first eight shows how unprepared most of Hardy's public would be to appreciate them. In these

early novels Hardy had been, for the most part, content to work in the school of "modern-romance", and an audience reared on the products of that school, including Hardy's own, would not be likely to take kindly to serious and searching works that concerned themselves with the plight of the déracinés, with man's place in an indifferent universe, with the strictures imposed on the free spirit by the demands of society, or with any of the other themes that the modern reader studies and dissects and discusses.

If Hardy's early work and the early criticism of it can be seen as a kind of prelude to things to come, this is not to say that these eight novels (Two on a Tower, the ninth, could be 'classified' with them also) form a separate entity, or that the criticism of them bears no relation to that which has appeared since: clearly, this is not the case. On the contrary, just as there are adumbrations in the novels themselves of qualities, arguments, incidents, characters that will emerge later, so there are critical points made that serve as the foundation for later ones. The preoccupation in many reviews with the place of women in Hardy's books, with the characteristics of his heroines, is significant, and the fact that much of the writing is unsophisticated compared with, say, Guérard does not invalidate the point. (Most modern

writing about Hardy is unsophisticated compared with Guérard.) That Moule could say in 1871 of Desperate Remedies, "none of the male characters come quite up to the women"; that he points out to his readers a year later that Fancy Day is "inordinately moved by admiration"; that a year later still he speaks of Elfrida as caught up in "the tragedy of circumstance, the power of mere events"; that the Standard sees Ethelberta as "a woman of rare and complex character" and the Spectator sees Paula as "thoroughly modern, restless, active, and intelligent" - all of these, and many others, are straws in the wind, and it is surely not fanciful to speculate that Hardy might have been encouraged by the general fascination for and admiration of the women in his books to concentrate on this part of his work, with the most powerful results later.

There are other characteristics besides Hardy's way with women that link the early novels to the later, and it is significant that they do not go unobserved by Hardy's critics: his humour and his sense of irony; his ability to manage a plot so that one event leads out of another;² his concern with social distinctions; his knowledge of the peculiar strength of family ties; his exploration of the effects of

2 With all the concentration in modern criticism on the use of coincidence and accident as pivots in the plots it is often forgotten how many other crucial events are plausible, even inevitable, given the people and the circumstances.

environment upon character; especially of man's links with the natural world; his sense of the grotesque; his awareness of the harm done by weakness - all of these are to be found somewhere in the early books, and all of them are touched on to a greater or lesser degree by the reviewers.

Hardy had the satisfaction, at least in these early years of his career and in spite of setbacks, of seeing his reputation grow, of achieving his limited ambitions with something to spare, and - perhaps without knowing it - of preparing the way for what was to come. His success as a man of letters, as a writer whose work was looked for by the reading public and whose name was well known, as an 'ordinary' novelist, gave him a following whose numbers were far greater than they would have been had his career begun with works of the richness and seriousness of Tess or Jude or The Woodlanders or The Mayor of Casterbridge. There is an impetus given to his career, an enabling incentive to continue, that makes the criticisms of his first books particularly important. In one sense many of them may have been 'unhelpful', it is true that, in the light of his whole career, it is possible to argue that he was sometimes praised for the wrong things, or not encouraged in the right direction,

but sub specie aeternitatis this turns out to be irrelevant. What is important is that these anonymous reviewers did praise and did encourage; they were able, for the most part and however gropingly, to recognize Hardy's talents, even to hit upon some of the qualities that are likely always to be considered as crucial to an understanding of his work. That this was so in an age when the novel itself, and, much more, the criticism of fiction, were only beginning to be seen as being worthy of serious consideration, is something which should not be omitted from any comprehensive study of Hardy and his work.

APPENDIX I

SOME FACTS CONCERNING NOVEL REVIEWING IN 1871

A. The Twenty-seven Novels

1	Askaros Kassiss, the Kopt	Edwin de Leon	Chapman and Hall	1 vol.	Romance/Sensation
2	Blanche Seymour	Anon.	Tinsley	3	Romance
3	The Canon's Daughter	Robert St. John Corbet	Tinsley	2	Romance
4	Checkmate	Sheridan le Fanu	Hurst and Blackett	3	Sensation
5	The Coming Race	[Lord Lytton]	Blackwood	1	Social Comment
6	A Daughter of Heth	[William Black]	Low	3	Romance
7	Desperate Remedies	[Thomas Hardy]	Tinsley	3	Romance/Sensation
8	Dr. Wainwright's Patient	Edmund Yates	Chapman and Hall	1	Romance
9	Dorothy Fox	Louisa Parr	Strahan	3	Romance
10	Earl's Dene	R.E. Francillon	Blackwood	3	Romance/Sensation
11	Episodes in an Obscure Life	[Richard Rowe]	Strahan	3	Social Comment
12	For Lack of Gold	Charles Gibbon	Blackie	3	Romance
13	Gerald Hastings, of Barton	Anon.	Tinsley	3	Sensation
14	Harry Disney	Atholl de Waldon	Tinsley	3	Sensation
15	Her Lord and Master	Florence Marryat	Bentley	3	Romance
16	Her Own Fault	Mrs J.K. Spender	Hurst and Blackett	3	Romance
17	Ierne	W. Steuart French	Longmans	2	Historical/Romance
18	Influence	Mrs Brookfield	Chapman and Hall	2	Romance/Social Comment
19	In that State of Life	Hamilton Aldé	Smith, Elder	1	Romance
20	Joshua Marvel	B.L. Farjeon	Tinsley	3	Romance/Adventure
21	The Lone Ranche	Mayne Reid	Chapman and Hall	2	Adventure
22	Maurice Rynhart	J.T. Listado	Chapman and Hall	2	Historical/Romance
23	My Heroine!	Anon.	Tinsley	1	Romance
24	Ralph the Heir	Anthony Trollope	Hurst and Blackett	3	Romance/Social Comment
25	The Silent Partner	Elizabeth Phelps	Low	1	Social Comment
26	Tom Pippin's Wedding	[Henry Pullen]	Simpkin, Marshall	1	Social Comment
27	Véra	[Charlotte Dempster]	Smith, Elder	1	Romance

B. Treatment of the Twenty-seven Novels by the Three Major Weeklies

Athenaeum			Saturday Review			Spectator					
Date	Weeks after publication	Length of review	Words quoted from book	Date	Weeks after publication	Length of review	Words quoted from book	Date	Weeks after publication	Length of review	Words quoted from book
1	February 11	9	674	February 18	10	2123	-	April 22	19	2260	-
2	March 11	1	829	March 18	2	2123	-	April 1	4	1664	-
3	February 4	1	393	April 8	10	2145	231	February 25	4	2029	-
4	February 18	3	446	March 18	7	1947	341	February 25	4	1516	-
5	May 27	1	1558	May 27	1	1859	-	June 3	2	2692	491
6	June 10	2	535	June 24	4	1936	-	June 17	3	2493	920
7	April 1	1	612	September 30	27	2441	384	April 22	4	3021	2041
8	February 11	3	605	February 4	2	2266	110	April 22	13	288	-
9	January 14	3	459	February 11	7	2112	330	July 1	27	1328	348
10	February 4	2	837	March 11	7	2178	220	February 11	3	1847	-
11	February 25	1	721	April 8	7	1947	-	March 4	2	2195	668
12	April 22	1	736	May 27	6	2002	165	May 6	3	2275	668
13	January 28	8	1116	January 14	6	2101	-	February 4	9	325	-
14	May 20	3	620	May 27	4	2024	231	August 26	17	553	-
15	March 11	1	667	March 25	3	2233	231	April 8	5	1676	-
16	April 22	4	380	April 29	5	2200	-	June 24	13	980	-
17	March 4	3	1620	April 22	10	3597	-	August 26	28	2648	288
18	January 21	1	385	February 11	4	1881	341	May 20	18	363	-
19	April 15	3	357	April 22	4	2024	110	May 6	36	1995	945
20	June 10	2	558	July 15	7	2048	420	September 9	15	2421	882
21	June 17	1	473	July 1	3	2101	132	September 30	16	1835	50
22	April 1	2	620	June 3	11	2310	-	April 22	5	1277	-
23	June 24	2	667	July 29	7	858	-	August 26	11	303	-
24	April 15	1	1581	April 29	3	2519	-	April 15	1	3291	1159
25	April 1	2	659	May 6	7	2101	143	June 10	12	1925	865
26	June 17	5	945	June 3	3	2354	-	June 3	3	2290	340
27	February 18	3	318	February 18	3	2497	165	March 25	8	2468	1061

C. Reviews of the Twenty-seven Novels

	Athenaeum	British Quarterly Review	Examiner	Globe	Graphic	Guardian	John Bull	Morning Post	Pall Mall Gazette	Public Opinion	Queen	Saturday Review	Spectator	Times	Vanity Fair	Total
1 Askeros Kassis, the Kopt	x		x		x		x					x	x		x	7
2 Blanche Seymour	x		x		x	x		x				x	x		x	8
3 The Canon's Daughter	x		x						x			x	x		x	6
4 Checkmate	x	x	x	x	x		x		x			x	x		x	10
5 The Coming Race	x	x	x	x			x	x		x		x	x	x	x	11
6 A Daughter of Heth.	x		x	x	x	x	x					x	x			8
7 Desperate Remedies	x							x				x	x		x	5
8 Dr. Wainwright's Patient	x				x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	9
9 Dorothy Fox	x	x	x			x			x			x	x			7
10 Earl's Dene	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			x	x	x		x	11
11 Episodes in an Obscure Life	x	x	x			x			x			x	x			7
12 For Lack of Gold	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			13
13 Gerald Hastings, of Barton	x					x						x	x	x		5
14 Harry Disney	x		x		x			x				x	x			6
15 Her Lord and Master	x		x	x		x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	11
16 Her Own Fault	x	x	x		x	x	x		x			x	x		x	10
17 Ierne	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		12
18 Influence	x		x			x		x				x	x	x		7
19 In that Sate of Life	x	x	x				x	x				x	x		x	8
20 Joshua Marvel	x	x			x		x				x	x	x		x	8
21 The Lone Ranche	x			x								x	x			4
22 Maurice Rhyhart	x		x	x		x	x	x				x	x			8
23 My Heroine!	x								x			x	x			4
24 Ralph the Heir	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x		11
25 The Silent Partner	x		x	x								x	x			5
26 Tom Pippin's Wedding.	x						x			x		x	x			5
27 Vera	x	x					x	x			x	x	x	x	x	9
Total	27	12	19	11	10	13	16	14	9	4	5	27	27	8	13	

D. Summaries

1. The Twenty-seven Novels

Authors: 6 women, 18 men, 3 unidentifiable.

Publishers: Tinsley 7. Chapman and Hall 5. Hurst and Blackett 3. Blackwood; Low; Smith, Elder; Strahan, 2 each. Blackie; Bentley; Longmans; Simpkin, Marshall, 1 each.

Number of Volumes: 14 three-volume; 5 two-volume; 8 one-volume.

Types: 11 Romance; 4 Social Comment; 3 Romance/Sensation; 3 Sensation; 2 Historical/Romance; 2 Romance/Social Comment; 1 Adventure; 1 Romance/Adventure.

2. The Athenaeum

Average delay before reviewing: 2 weeks
 Number of books reviewed within a month: 24
 Longest delay: 9 weeks
 Average length of standard review: 587 words
 Number of reviews that include quotation: 1
 Length of quotation: 162 words
 Amount of review given to quotation: 17%

3. The Saturday Review

Average delay before reviewing: 5 weeks
 Number of books reviewed within a month: 12
 Longest delay: 27 weeks
 Average length of standard review: 2139 words
 Number of reviews that include quotation: 15
 Average length of quotation: 237 words
 Average amount of review given to quotation: 11%

4. The Spectator

Average delay before reviewing: 9 weeks
 Number of books reviewed within a month: 11
 Longest delay: 28 weeks
 Average length of standard review: 2089 words
 Number of reviews that include quotation: 14
 Average length of quotation: 759 words
 Average amount of review given to quotation: 31%

APPENDIX II

TWO REVIEW ARTICLES

Towards the end of the ten-year period covered by this study, two lengthy articles appeared which set out to review the whole of Hardy's career up to that point. Both articles are entitled "Mr. Hardy's Novels". The first, written by Charles Kegan Paul, was published anonymously in the New Quarterly Magazine¹ shortly after the appearance of The Return of the Native. The second appeared in the British Quarterly Review² at the time that A Laodicean was appearing in serial form.

This appendix will concentrate on reviewing the generalizations that the authors make, paying less attention to their assessments of individual novels, except where they throw new light on the picture. What is particularly of interest here is the view of Hardy which two writers can take after deliberately surveying all of his books. Some parts of their view are at first sight surprising: Kegan Paul, early in his essay, suggests that

It is a mistake to identify him with his studies of the western heath country and its inhabitants, as it is a mistake to identify any truly productive genius with the objects which have nourished, or even consciously inspired it ...

1 Vol. ii, new series, (1879), 412-31.

2 Vol. lxxiii (1881), 342-60.

but this opinion is justified by the observation that although Hardy has described his associations "with the vividness of long personal intimacy,

they by no means always occupy the foreground of his pictures; from some, and not the least powerful, they are absent altogether,

and it is surely connected with one of Kegan Paul's earliest assertions: "this genius was typically and completely manifested in 'A Pair of Blue Eyes'".

There is also something unfamiliar at first sight about another of the opening generalizations, until the modern reader stops to realize how much his view of Hardy is coloured by knowledge of the last books:

though the author's descriptive attitude is impartial almost to indifference, he is redeemed from the reproach of cynicism which impartial writers so often incur, by his obvious belief in a moral order to which human action is subject, if not responsible. ... the lives of all his personages bear witness to that principle of natural retribution or of natural consequences which is the practical form of the moral law.

The Kegan Paul article, however, turns to a point which is not only perceptive but in a way almost prophetic; it is certainly one that would stand up to examination in any critical count:

For the time being, and with such superficial exceptions as prove the rule, Mr. Hardy's genius strikes us as gothic in expression, but largely pagan in spirit. It tends always to a primitive conception of human life and character. Man seems to impress him as a natural,

rather than social, or at least, socialized being; capricious rather than complex; possessing the power of growth, and free from innate obligation to grow into any given form; and in this view society presents itself as an arrangement rather than an organism, and social tradition as a mechanical agent rather than a vital fact. ... To whatever social category his personages belong, they are as free from it as if they were so many Grecian gods.

Kegan Paul later calls this propensity of Hardy's, "the simplicity of his point of view", and finds something analogous to it in his "estimate of the nature of women". The paragraph that deals with this topic is long and confusing, too difficult to summarize and too lengthy to quote. Its significance lies perhaps in the evidence it offers of the existence of a special interest in Hardy's heroines, and in some of its assertions -

his women are invariably men's women ... but the men's women of ordinary novels fill a secondary place, whereas Mr. Hardy's female characters are never secondary.

... though the men do not lack individuality, they are chiefly introduced with reference to the women, and only fully developed at the points of contact with them.

his idea of women is that of a pagan grace which does not require and often excludes the estimable.

His most loveable and most beloved female character, Elfride Swancourt ...³

3 Later Kegan Paul suggests that Sergeant Troy is "the most successful" of the male characters.

His women develop from the moral and the aesthetic side, but never become thoroughly responsible creatures. There is doubtless something dramatic in the complete contrast which deprives one sex of all the mental qualities of the other.

His women would often be better if they were better loved: that is to say, if their lovers expected better things of them.

The dissatisfaction Kegan Paul finds with these two aspects of Hardy's work is by no means strong enough to overcome his admiration for what he calls Hardy's

"masculine" genius:

His power of making a plot, of setting characters in motion, of arousing and sustaining interest is unsurpassed, perhaps unrivalled in modern fiction; and while it uses at pleasure exceptional incidents or the occurrences of every day life, his success is proportioned in due dramatic manner to the absence of intention with which he appears to have set to work.

There follows a series of brief criticisms of all the books in turn, in which occasionally Kegan Paul is able, like a modern reader, to take advantage of hindsight to make a perceptive judgment that would otherwise not have occurred to him. Thus he is able in speaking of Desperate Remedies to remark on its flimsiness and the way in which Hardy's "sympathy with nature" had clearly not been at work in this first attempt

... if his imagination had been fired ten years ago, instead of one or two, by the tragic suggestions of Egdon Heath and Shadwater Weir ... we might have had a sensation novel embodying all his characteristic powers. But his imagination had not been fired ...

Similarly he can see The Hand of Ethelberta as "a fantastic interlude to his more serious work" and judge it as such.

In his assessment of The Return of the Native Kegan Paul is able to do what few of his fellow reviewers are - to look at it in the light of a recent reconsideration of Hardy's other works. The result is sometimes illuminating, as when he disagrees with the view that because it is a more serious work than any of its predecessors the book is "in every sense 'stronger'":

If 'The Return of the Native' is more earnest than 'A Pair of Blue Eyes' or 'Far from the Madding Crowd,' it is also less spontaneous. It suggests a more definite intention on the author's part, but also, dramatically, though not otherwise, a less equal inspiration. In his earlier works character is developed by circumstance; we cannot predict what is coming, and when the end comes, we can imagine no other to have been possible. In the present work the characters are defined from the first, the action becomes transparent ... Hitherto the tragedy has been rooted in the facts of the story. In the present instance it is more or less imported into them.⁴

4 This is illustrated by a consideration of Mrs. Yeobright's death: "It is brought about by a concurrence of circumstances, possible in itself, and more than adequate to the result ... and if the event had only ordinary consequences, we should not wish to dispute its likelihood. But when we reflect that it converts its object into a martyr, to whom indirectly two other lives are sacrificed; that its one exciting cause is a short delay in opening a door, due more to accident than to ill-will; and that this cause depends ... on the coincidence of a hitherto unsuspected physical weakness with the other predisposing facts, the situation strikes us as morally strained, however well worked out from an artistic point of view."

... the question stands thus: imagination and intellect are fighting for mastery in Mr. Hardy's work. Which will prevail? Will the unconscious inspiration assimilate the motive? or will the consciousness of the motive paralyse the inspiration? ... No assumption that the answer will be favourable could be more respectful than the interest with which we await it.

* * * * *

The writer in the British Quarterly takes for his point of departure the fact that "it was a surprise to many who read the words" that a journal had named Hardy as George Eliot's successor:

The English public, greedy for amusement, careless about good, finished and subtle literary work, is very slow to understand that of stories which have charmed a leisure hour some are destined to pass into complete forgetfulness ... while others become a part of the literature of the country, to be read and re-read and to place their characters as living beings among the viewless companions of our thoughts.

The qualities that are called for in the writer who may achieve immortality are enumerated and examined. It is a well-worn list: the power to make "their brain children our familiar friends"; the ability to write "chapters that are quotable and readable apart from the context, for the pleasure which they give of themselves";⁵ the judgment to see that

5 "We should be surprised to find that any intelligent person who keeps a book of extracts, no mean test of the beautiful in literature, has ever taken the trouble to copy into it a passage from [Mr. Trollope and Mrs. Oliphant]."

"the first-rate workman rarely writes with set purpose to draw a moral";⁶ the realization that "a writer must strike some deep human interest which shall be quite independent of the circumstances of the time in which the scene is laid ... [an] intensely human sympathy"; the knowledge that "all great writers are autobiographical ... the true artist must use up what has come to him".⁷

There is clear implication that Hardy is endowed with all of these qualities; his having several of them is explicitly asserted as the inventory proceeds:

The test [of being able to remember characters and to place them in their contexts] is one any reader can apply, and to those who do so we have every confidence that Fancy Day and Dick Dewey, Ethelberta Pethewin, Clym Yeobright and Eustacia Vye, Parson Swancourt, and all the host of minor persons, ... will become to their minds and memories as real and indestructible, say, as Adam Bede or Romola, and even as those drawn by Shakspeare's mighty hand, though they lack his perfect art.

George Eliot has for the most part taken a society which changes little - homely people with homely lives. It has been remarked that a boundless sympathy was her characteristic ... Mr. Hardy, in the same way, but even to a greater extent, takes life where it changes least, and considers it in its most simply human aspects.

6 "It is inconceivable that Shakspeare should have called [his] play 'Jealousy, or the Moor of Venice' ... He thinks of a man ... and exhibits his qualities ..."

7 Originality which is not based in a large degree on personal experience is a making of bricks not only without straw, but with very little clay.

Few men have used their own experience so much as Mr. Hardy ... yet few have ever seemed so original to those who are in sympathy with the life which he describes.

Before going on to his examination of each of the novels in turn the writer turns in an aside to an elaboration of the autobiographical element in Hardy's work as a whole, and gives a picture of the man which is somewhat out of harmony with that which Hardy later presented to the world:

We do not pretend to be wholly ignorant of some personal details of the author's life, but are sure that even one who was so would construct without difficulty a theory which would not fail widely when it came to be verified. That Mr. Hardy, like Mr. Barnes the Dorset poet, is sprung of a race of labouring men in a county where the real old families are attached to the soil ...; that he is not 'too proud to care from whence he came,' that, on the contrary, he regards his stock as reason for exceeding pride - one the dignity of labour, the other that the country working-man is of nearer kin to that nature which he idealizes and personifies, till it has all the characteristics of some great supra-natural being; - that he is thus anthropomorphic, but not in a theological sense, is apparent on the face of what he writes.

From the individual assessments that follow and make up the bulk of the article, there are passages worth extracting for a study of this kind. Under the Greenwood Tree receives special attention "because all the sweet and liberal air of Dorset blows through it":

In it Mr. Hardy has laid down the lines of his work, so to speak, and we may therefore examine some of his special excellences before proceeding further. First, Mr. Hardy has interpreted for us the village life which is so difficult to understand. ...* Next he is the interpreter of the simpler aspects of nature to many who have no time to commune with her, and learn her secrets at first hand. ... In all his books, without any effort, Mr. Hardy brings in nature as a personality, now aiding, now at war with man, now subdued, now triumphant, but always as living and in relation to human life. There is something of the relic of old paganism in his way of viewing her, as indeed there is so much of it in his own county.⁸

A Pair of Blue Eyes is important because it shows great advances in the drawing of character, and because, in the scenes where Hardy deals with death, he reveals "a whimsicality of treatment which is strange, but neither jarring nor irreverent":

What Mr. Hardy does in reference to death he does also in reference to other ills attendant upon life - disease, sorrow, superstition. He could not bear the tragedy, or help us to bear it, unless he showed the strand of comedy interwoven; he is ironical in the deepest sense.

* More than two pages of excerpt and illustration follow, culminating in "And having lived among West country folk from childhood, the writer of these lines believes there is not in all Mr. Hardy's works one exaggerated or untrue word in his descriptions of those whom he knows so well."

8 Later in the article, in reference to the setting of The Return of the Native, the writer recounts how "We remember hearing Mr. Hardy say that, when he was writing it, he thought to himself that only Mr. _____ among all his probate readers in London would know accurately the district of his story."

The Hand of Ethelberta is seen as "one of the most striking works of English fiction because

it is throughout comedy, ... yet in it was put forth one side of the author's view of duty as the moving principle of life, to be worked out grandly and seriously in a yet maturer work. [Ethelberta's] moving principle is love for her family, the desire to advance them in such ways as they, not she, consider best. We rise to the thought of an abstract humanity to which each has his duties, to which each owes a true unselfish love, through the idea of the family.

The Return of the Native receives the highest praise of any of the books:

Mr. Hardy has touched his highest level, and we doubt if he will ever surpass it ... there is in it a sustained philosophy, a grasp of the problems of life, a clear conception of human duty which a man rarely puts into words twice and under more than one form. The leading thought is man's duty to man under discouragement, under the loss of love and health, and of hope of self. We scarcely know where in the range of English fiction to look for a more noble, more pathetic figure than that of Clym Yeobright, the itinerant open-air lecturer ...

In his summary the writer dwells at great length on "the first general fact that strikes us ... the unchanging character of the country side and the country folk." He draws attention to the "extraordinarily small part played by the clergy" in the novels, and shows how this is justified by his own observation:

The Church in Wessex has not eradicated superstition (how, indeed, should it do so?), has only affected morals to an unappreciable extent ... were it to be objected to Mr. Hardy's books that there is about them here and there a kind of frank paganism, an acceptance, without moral blame, of superstition, no hasty scouting of the possibility of witchcraft, a forgetfulness of the triumphs of civilization; we should reply that these are some of the essential characteristics of the people and the country among which he has lived, that he gives life as he sees it, and not as it ought to be according to the ideas of certain outsiders.

There follows a vindication of the Dorset labouring man, and an account of the faithfulness of Hardy's portrait of him, before the writer comes to a conclusion, much more assured, much less speculative than Kegan Paul's:

Our pleasant task is almost done. We think we have said enough to show that here is a novelist who - while he excites little short of wonder and enthusiasm in a certain section of the public, the comparatively few who know him - has not at all taken hold on the great popular mind, sometimes slow to discover when a new genius has arisen in the intellectual sky.

We have only to say more, that while Mr. Hardy is never didactic, never dogmatic, never definitely religious - the novelist who is so imperfectly apprehends the difference between a novel and a sermon, spoiling both - his whole influence is pure, ennobling, and gracious; there is no line from beginning to end of his works we could wish to blot, no book which does not leave the reader heartily amused and raised in moral tone.

That Mr. Hardy has taken his place in the true literature of England is to us beyond question. For his sake and for their own we trust the larger public will recognize the fact, and steep themselves in the fresh healthy air of Dorset, and come into contact with the kindly folk who dwell there, through these pages, and then test their truth, as they can, in summer visits to the wolds, hill-sides, and coasts, which their 'native' has described so well.

APPENDIX III

EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS OF FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

The following extracts are the most complimentary sentences from fourteen of the eighteen reviews written for Far from the Madding Crowd. They supplement the quotations given in pages 145 to 178. They are given here in an approximate order of enthusiasm.

EXAMINER

Without making minute comparisons between Mr. Hardy and any of his contemporary novelists, let it suffice to say that this last work of his at once lifts his name above the crowd, and gives him a position among the eminent few which it rests with himself to confirm or to diminish. Mr. Hardy is not a novelist to whom the exercise of his art is a bywork or a recreation; it is clear that he has given his best energies to its service, and has worked with faithful and patient zeal for his reward. It is pleasing to meet with work that is so obviously the outcome of high aims: and one should not be grudging in expressing one's conviction of the artist's thorough success. 'Far From the Madding Crowd' is not Mr. Hardy's first novel, but it is so much more mature and powerful in every way than his earlier efforts that in them he seems rather to have been exercising himself with a view to obtaining a command of his materials. This is particularly true of 'Under the Greenwood Tree,' published some two years ago, which the author called "A rural painting of the Dutch School," and in which he depicted rural life in an English county with the most loving minuteness and intimate fidelity of detail. 'A Pair of Blue Eyes,' Mr. Hardy's next effort, was not so exclusively pictorial; it was a study of a more tragic kind, with more complex characters and a more stirring plot; but the evolution was none the less deliberate, and every

situation was worked out with the same painstaking and searching method. Both 'Under the Greenwood Tree' and 'A Pair of Blue Eyes' are very remarkable novels, which no one could read without admiring the close and penetrating observation, and pictorial and narrative power of the writer. But 'Far From the Madding Crowd' is not only an advance upon them in freedom and firmness of handling, but it excels them also in concentration of interest, and in spacious breadth and solid truth of proportion.

MORNING POST

Amongst the works of fiction which have lately appeared there is one which in every sense deserves the epithet remarkable ... the author has broken entirely new ground, and has come forward with a whole set of personages and surroundings quite unlike anything we have had before ... A fresh, original book like this of Mr. Hardy's is a treat we very rarely meet with.

ECHO

Another pastoral from the pen of Mr. Hardy would have been welcome had it only equalled his former productions in merit, but this new chronicle of Arcadia is, in many respects, superior to either of his most successful works. ... When the most exquisite freshness of thought and manner are the chief characteristics of a writer, the critic looks anxiously upon his later efforts, fearing lest the dew should have died upon the flower, the bloom been brushed from the fruit. Nothing of the kind has happened in the present case, rather is there advance on every point. ... Mr. Hardy's very fascinating tale.

JOHN BULL

... it rises to the dignity of a novel of the first class ... the originality of the author is unquestionable.

DAILY NEWS

... "Far from the Madding Crowd" is a novel much above the average. Its story rises in interest to a well-devised dramatic climax; each character is a distinct and truthful figure; and the style is good, though too often ponderously thought out in ponderous words.

WORLD

If Mr. Hardy continues to pursue the path which he now so firmly treads, he cannot fail to achieve distinction ... [he] exhibits perhaps his greatest skill in the creation of a moral atmosphere which prepares the mind for the events that are to follow, and it is here that he most conclusively vindicates his claim to the title of artist. It is a title that he deserves. Far from the Madding Crowd is not merely a clever novel, it is a highly-promising, and in portions finished, specimen of literary art.

GUARDIAN

The landscapes of rural life are most natural and pretty; the conversations almost Shakespearian in vigour; and the plot, which at first seems to be in abeyance, quickens at last into vivid interest, and escapes from what looks like a hopeless complication by an incident which, if startling, is not at all, under the circumstances, improbable. ... an extremely good novel.

TIMES

Mr. Hardy showed signs last year, in "A Pair of Blue Eyes," of having raised for himself a higher standard of excellence than that with which ordinary novel-writers and ordinary novel-readers are well content. In his new book, "Far from the Madding Crowd" (2 vols., Smith and Elder), there is still further evidence of his possessing a certain vein of original thought, and a delicate perceptive faculty, which transforms, with skilful touch, the matter-of-fact prosaic details of every-day life into an idyl or a pastoral poem. In parts this story rises to the dignity of both an idyl and a pastoral, for while some pages describe the simple life of farm and field with all

the incidents of seed-time and harvest, reaping and shearing, there are other passages in which Mr. Hardy deals with the subtle promptings of a wilful woman's heart, or with the strong, fervent love of a grown man, and which yet are as unconventional and true to nature as his description of the quiet slopes of Norcombe Hill. This idyllic or romantic element is never violent or forced, and is always kept within due bounds. Though the book is rich in fancy, imagination never gains an undue mastery over the writer; there is the comfortable sense all the time that Mr. Hardy has his subject well in hand, and, for all its tragic tendencies, will never let it turn to ranting or pathos.

... a pathetic and beautiful story - old, alas! as Adam and Eve, but Mr. Hardy tells it with a tenderness and freshness which have not often been surpassed in modern novels.

The book is too good to be dealt with in so curt a fashion as our space compels, and we can only advise the reader who appreciates a novel which rises a good deal beyond the ordinary dead-level of mawkish sentiment and romantic twaddle to procure for himself the pleasure of reading this clever story.

QUEEN

... He has shown artistic power, even genius, in making his events and people seem absolutely real; in fact, we would say that his great strength seems to lie in idealising the real.

OBSERVER

... Far from the Madding Crowd is a wonderfully clever book, and we will add, an uncommonly interesting one ... [but] we are convinced he could write a much better ... which would be equally entertaining. His keen love and penetrating eye for the face, changes and operations of Nature, his sly humour, his conversational power - though this is a little forced sometimes, and his talent for describing things briskly and tersely, are great qualities in a novelist ... Nevertheless, we repeat it unhesitatingly, the novel in question is a very remarkable book.

ACADEMY

Far from the Madding Crowd is so clever a novel, so original in atmosphere and in character, that its brilliant qualities are likely to neutralize the glare of its equally prominent faults.

ATHENAEUM

Mr. Hardy ... is at once an interesting and a disappointing writer. He is, perhaps, the most vigorous of all the novelists who have appeared within the last few years; his powers of description, his skill in devising "situations," his quaint humour secure him a high place among novelists of any age; while, on the other hand, a sort of recklessness seems at times to overcome and neutralize all these qualities ... and we are alternately attracted and repelled by admirable delineations of men and nature on the one hand, and gross improbabilities on the other, till we lay [the book] down, unable to say whether the author is an ill-regulated genius or a charlatan with some touches of cleverness. ... On the whole, we leave Mr. Hardy with some hope. He ought to hold his peace for at least two years, revise with extreme care, and refrain from publishing in magazines; then, though he has not done it yet, he may possibly write a nearly, if not quite, first-rate novel.

SPECTATOR

No one who reads this very original and amusing story will doubt for a moment that it is a production of a very high order of ability and humour. Everything in the book is fresh, and almost everything in the book is striking. ... On the whole, the book is amusing and exceedingly clever even in its mistakes and faults, - so that whether we admire its delineations of life, or think them impossible, we are always interested, and always inclined to admire the author, though not for his mistakes.

SATURDAY

There was promise [in Under the Greenwood Tree and A Pair of Blue Eyes] of something really good being produced in future works. And that promise, though not quite fulfilled,

is given again in Far from the Madding Crowd. It is nearer fulfilment than it was ... But there is still a good deal wanting, and Mr. Hardy has much to learn, or perhaps we ought to say, to unlearn, before he can be placed in the first order of modern English novelists. He takes trouble, and is not in a hurry to work off his sketches. They are imaginative, drawn from the inside, and highly finished. They show power also of probing and analysing the deeper shades of character, and showing how characters are affected and how destinies are influenced for good or evil, by the circumstances which act upon them. But Mr. Hardy disfigures his pages by bad writing, by clumsy and inelegant metaphors, and by mannerism and affectation ... if he will only throw aside his mannerisms and eccentricity and devote himself zealously to the cultivation of his art, he may rise to a high position among English novelists.

APPENDIX IV

ANOTHER THESIS ON A SIMILAR TOPIC

After all the searching and reading for this thesis had been completed, and when more than half the writing had been done, I discovered that a Ph.D. thesis had been accepted in October 1963 by New York University, on what appeared to be an almost identical topic. The thesis was by Arthur F. Minerof, and was entitled "Thomas Hardy's Novels: A Study in Critical Reception and Author Response, 1871-1900."

My first reaction was that, like Swithen St. Cleeve in Two on a Tower, when he heard of the publication elsewhere of a theory he was about to offer to the world, I should lie down in a ditch and pass from this cruel world. My second thought was to buy a copy of the thesis, read it after completing my own, and add, in an appendix, any findings or important observations that I might have overlooked.

Minerof seems to have relied entirely on Purdy, Weber and other writers for his list of British reviews; he does not cite any which has not been referred to elsewhere, and there is no indication that he has made a search himself. It seems that he did not know of the continued existence of Hardy's scrapbook and it is certain that he did not know which reviews it contained. The total number of British reviews of the first eight novels given in his bibliography amounts to 46; this may be

compared with the 69 in Hardy's scrapbook, and the 126 upon which this thesis is based. Of the 46 Minerof deals with 14 that are not in the scrapbook, yet his assumption seems always that Hardy saw all of them and was liable to be influenced by any of them.

Neither his thesis nor his bibliography contains any general study of novel criticism in the period; he assumes, not incorrectly as it happens, that criticism of Hardy was fairly typical of criticism in general. The deductions about Victorian taste that he makes from the Hardy reviews are not wide of the mark, but there is, nevertheless, an absence of perspective which sometimes leads to his overestimating, as Hardy himself appears to have done, the vehemence of an adverse criticism. He appears not to know that other critics of other novels could be far more unpleasant. Similarly he speaks of "extravagant praise" in relation to reviews which, compared with others of the time, are comparatively mild in their approval.

The chapters dealing with the first eight novels occupy 261 pages, but much of the space is taken up with extensive summaries of present-day opinion, with references to the novels in various critical essays that appeared later in the century, and with arguing with the Victorian reviewers, whose criticisms

are often "dismissed" as "wrong", "incorrect", "invalid", "inadequate", or even "subjective".

The danger of making bricks without straw may be seen most clearly in Minerof's chapter on The Hand of Ethelberta. The British reviews upon which he bases his argument number five, two of which Hardy may well not have seen (he certainly did not preserve them). This ignores at least fifteen other reviews, and Hardy's knowledge of nine that Minerof does not consider. Yet Minerof attacks Hardy for the passage in the Life which says (p. 108)

It was received in a friendly spirit and even with admiration in some quarters - more, indeed, than Hardy had expected ... It did not, however, win the cordiality that had greeted its two forerunners, the chief objection seeming to be that it was 'impossible'.

Minerof's comment (p. 132) is as follows:

The section in The Early Life dealing with the critical reception of The Hand of Ethelberta does not give an accurate picture of the almost totally negative attitude of the reviewers toward the book ... The beginning [of the section] also tends to mislead the naive reader not familiar with what the critics had written about the novel because it stresses positive reaction on the part of Hardy's contemporary reviewers. ... It is only after the introductory positive note that Hardy revealed the true nature of the novel's reception and the main reason for this attitude on the part of the critics: "It did not, however, win the cordiality that had greeted its two forerunners, the chief objection seeming to be that it was 'impossible'". Hardy could only have written "seeming to be" in connection with the charge of the novel being "impossible" to becloud the true picture of the content of the reviews for anyone reading the biography but not the reviews. There is no question about "seeming to be" in the reviews. The critics were quite explicit in charging that the characters and situations in the story were improbable.

The fact that Hardy had read the highly complimentary review in the Examiner as well as the very satisfactory one in the World, and that Minerof had read neither, ought to be relevant.

Minerof's thesis, however, does add two details to those I would consider of importance in connection with Hardy's interest in reviews and in receiving advice. He includes the very telling sentence from a letter Hardy sent to Macmillan (Morgan, op. cit., p. 91), "Would you mind suggesting the sort of story you think I could do best, or any literary work I should do well to go upon;" and he mentions Morgan's report that when Hardy was trying to interest Macmillan in Under the Greenwood Tree he sent him copies of the four reviews he had collected of Desperate Remedies.

The other point of substance and relevance is that, in spite of his tendency to concentrate on the way in which Hardy's contemporaries were "wrong" in not liking The Return of the Native, Minerof confirms my own impression of the mistaken attitude adopted by present-day writers towards the early reception: "The positive aspect of these statements is sometimes overlooked or deemphasized by present Hardy scholars. Evelyn Hardy, Weber, Brown and Cecil speak mainly of the negative criticism."

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* Not in Hardy's scrapbook.

+ Date incorrect in Hardy's scrapbook, correct date given here.

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* The records kept at Blackwood's indicate that approximately 125 copies of each of the eight numbers of Daniel Deronda were distributed gratis, presumably most of these as review copies. This is about 25 more than the average number for the parts of Middlemarch.

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