



THOMAS HARDY

TOWARDS A MATERIALIST CRITICISM

GEORGE WOTTON

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Thomas Hardy:
Towards a Materialist
Criticism

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For Pam with love

Preface

'Every exploiting class', Sebastiano Timpanaro has written, 'always needs a discourse on "spiritual values"'. This book is in the nature of a critical engagement 'with one such discourse—'Literary Criticism'. It is not, however, a generalized polemic against varieties of literary critical or theoretical positions, rather it concentrates on a specific and concrete instance, namely the production and reproduction of the novels of Thomas Hardy. My aim has been to historicize Hardy's writing and, by regarding it as a social event rather than an ideal object, to contribute to an understanding of the function of imaginative writing not only in the process of cultural/ideological production but also in reproducing the actual relations of production in class society.

But if Hardy's writing has a history so too does the discourse which treats it as an object of knowledge, and if this book is the product of a struggle against one critical tradition it is also quite clearly produced out of another. Yet to put it in these terms is to point to a major difficulty. When, as a mature student at the University of Essex, I acquired in 1972 a copy of Pierre Macherey's *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, I found the concept of literary production a profound shock to my received Leavisite ideas about 'Literature', no less of a shock, indeed, than Marx's theory of social production was to my idealist notions about 'Life'. Both revealed my real ignorance concerning what I had long taken for granted as self evident truths about those two idealist categories and I understood for the first time that the effect of my own education and upbringing, of my trained responses—as an 'individual'—to 'Life' and 'Literature' had been to depoliticize me as a person. I had become a kind of ideological automaton, the very epitome of Matthew Arnold's

‘classless alien’. If this realization brought a sense of having to start afresh, to find a new beginning, it also brought a realization of the singular absence of a ‘place’ from which to start. The absence of an indigenous theoretical critical tradition produced an acute sense of disorientation. From where was one to take one’s bearings? As Terry Eagleton noted in the Preface to *Criticism and Ideology*, ‘Any English Marxist who tries now to construct a materialist aesthetics must be painfully conscious of his inadequacies ... to intervene from England is almost automatically to disenfranchise oneself from debate. It is to feel acutely bereft of a tradition, as a tolerated house-guest of Europe, a precocious but parasitic alien.’ Published in 1976 perhaps the greatest value of that pioneering work is the way it articulates the nature and extent of that historical isolation and alienation. It may seem to some a strange irony that the material place, the actual site of that new beginning was the ‘improbable institution’ (Eagleton’s term) of the University of Oxford. And yet it was the very improbability of *that* institution situated in a city where the structure of class division is so dramatically and visibly present in the radical separation of the great industrial complex of the car factory from the ideological apparatus of the University, that the contradictions and crises of the period were sharpened and focused.

While this country did not experience an upheaval comparable to that which shook France in 1968 in some respects the year 1972 came nearest to it. Two events in particular occurred in that year the far reaching effects of which are being violently felt as I write these words twelve years later. I refer to ‘Bloody Sunday’ when British paratroopers shot and killed thirteen people in Londonderry and to the 1972 miners’ strike. To some it appeared that the social foundations upon which the dreaming spires of the improbable institution rested were indeed crumbling. A senior advisor to the Heath government wrote of this time, ‘many of those in positions of influence looked into the abyss and saw only a few days away the possibility of the country being plunged into a state of chaos not so very far removed from that which might prevail after a minor nuclear attack.’* Between Bloody Sunday and the flying pickets of 1972

*Brendan Sewill, quoted in David Thompson, *England in the Twentieth Century*, Pelican Books, p. 317.

and the Brighton bombing and the pitched battles between police and miners' pickets of 1984 the economic crisis has deepened and the social and political contradictions have become more acute. Nowhere has the impact of this critical period been felt more than in the educational system. Every level and every area of the system has been profoundly affected and none more so than the humanities the role and function of which have undergone radical reappraisals both on the right as well as on the left. In this situation 'English Literature' has again become the site of bitter ideological and political struggles. The difference between now and ten years ago is that an English Marxist no longer feels disenfranchised from debate. A long historical silence has been shattered by all those who have struggled in many ways and in many places over the past decade to develop, in theory and in practice, a materialist understanding of cultural production.

While this book emerges out of that common struggle it is also stamped with a peculiarly personal imprint bearing as it does the marks of my own attempt to break with what Louis Althusser once called the language of ideological spontaneity. If the result of that personal struggle is a certain awkwardness, even crudity, then for that I alone am responsible. But in so far as one of the most formative influences on its production has been the practical activity of teaching literature in the Humanities department of Hatfield Polytechnic my indebtedness to other people is such that my own contribution has sometimes seemed to me to be almost marginal. This is a matter not only of theory but also of practice, particularly those innumerable situations both in the classroom and out of it where the issues raised here have been the subject of debate. The generation of ideas in such practical situations is always in a way communal, produced out of the necessities of the moment and to all those, both students and teachers, who have been part of that productive process, this book stands as a tribute. I would, however, like to thank those of my co-workers with whom I have been most closely associated at Hatfield Polytechnic, Gill Davies, Graham Pechey, Jean Radford and Judith Thompson. To them I am particularly indebted as also to Terry Eagleton, Paul O'Flinn and Peter Widdowson whose rigorous criticisms contributed to the shaping of this book.

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Introduction

The most startling thing about *The Great Tradition* is not the cavalier dismissal of 'the good little Thomas Hardy' from the realm of 'Literature' but just how much, in writing his book, Leavis felt—*knew*—he could take for granted. It is as though every evaluation he makes is prefaced by a rhetorical absence, an unspoken 'we all know, don't we, what is meant by life, art, consciousness, Literature?' That this silent assumption is of the utmost importance is evident from the fact that what we are all deemed to know and to take for granted as shared knowledge are the twin propositions upon which, even now, the scholastic practice of criticism is based. The first of these propositions concerns the *a priori* nature of 'Literature' and the second the evaluative function of criticism itself. Thus, emphatically, Leavis declares that 'The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad', and he establishes the domain of his study as 'the field of fiction belonging to Literature', a field in which 'some challenging discriminations are very much called for'.¹ It is not the value judgments themselves that a materialist criticism must call into question, but the 'self evident' truths upon which they are founded. And here we are confronted by the problem of meaning for when criticism ceases to be based on what could justifiably be called 'common sense', on that assumed understanding of something called 'Literature', then what is called for is no longer discrimination but definition.

In what ways then does a criticism grounded on materialist principles differ from criticism grounded in 'common sense'? To begin with, a materialist criticism rejects the distinction between 'fiction' and 'Literature' which is based on procedures of evaluation, and replaces it by a distinction between writing and

2 *Thomas Hardy: Towards a Materialist Criticism*

literature based on concepts of production. Here the word literature does not signify, as in Leavis's text, an object, the pre-existent domain of the discourse of criticism, but a *social relation*, the product of the social exchange between writing and criticism. From a materialist perspective Leavis's term 'Literature' signifies those texts which have undergone a determinate productive process in the ideological discourses of criticism which use the techniques of discrimination, evaluation, separation and elaboration to distinguish and elevate them from the various forms of 'imaginative' writing in general. The object of study for a materialist criticism, however, is not, as with Leavis, 'Literature', but the relations between history, ideology, writing and criticism. And the aim of a materialist criticism is not evaluation or the discovery of meaning or significance in the 'literary text' but an understanding of the historical conditions of the production of writing and the ways in which literature operates in the process of reproducing the relations of production of class society.

Furthermore, to think in materialist terms and in order to break with the idealist notions of writing as creation or reflection we should think of writing actively as labour² and language and ideology as the materials upon which that labour is expended, bearing in mind that while writers are undeniably the producers of their texts, they do not themselves produce the linguistic and ideological materials with which they work. Once the act of writing is thought of as a labour expended upon something, something which is not determined by the writer and which exists independently of him or her, then the nature of the relation between writers and what they produce is changed from one of private ownership to one of social process. The same also holds for the consumers of writing and their activity for as every reading of a text is a reproduction in the light of historical, ideological, linguistic and experiential factors which differ from those of the writer, the consumption of writing is simultaneously also a production. Literary criticism is a particular form of reading in which writing is consumed in certain determinate ways. In this productive consumption the writing is continually elaborated, 'constructed' and reproduced in the image of its meanings. It is not that the text is altered, rather it is ideologically activated, put to productive use.

As they appear in a materialist criticism then, writing and literature are conceptually different terms and cannot be distinguished from one another by evaluation as could Leavis's 'fiction' and 'Literature'. They are, rather, separate moments in a determinate productive process comprising an articulation between the historical moment of production of writing and the subsequent moments of consumption/reproduction which entail the ideological activation of writing by the discourse of criticism. However, the concept of production does not refer only to the separate moments in the production-consumption cycle of literature but also to the productive capacity of writing itself. There are two distinct but related elements here. The first involves what I shall call the aesthetic project which has to do with what the producer of the writing wants his or her product to do, that is, the ideological effect the writing is intended to produce. While this first element is a matter of ideological production and is bound up with the writer's intention, the second is a matter of a production of the ideological which is quite independent of intention. What I am suggesting is that writing produces a *scenario* of the ideological and that the 'view' of ideology which is thus produced is not a product of the writer's consciousness and is quite different from what the writer 'wants us to see'. It is therefore important to distinguish between the aesthetic project, the ideological problematic upon which that project rests and the 'view' of ideology produced by the writing, and to understand that a knowledge of these does not reside in writing but is itself a product of materialist criticism.

Briefly, the aesthetic project of Hardy's writing can be identified as the production of an *insight* into the true realities of life and the ideological problematic upon which this project is based is centred on the idea of knowledge being an act of discovery of a pre-existent reality which might be expressed by the formulation 'knowing as seeing'. Seeing here takes on a meaning which is much more than simply looking, for it is a definite *act* which every individual subject 'endowed with the faculty of "vision" ... exercises either attentively or distractedly'.³ This idealist and empiricist mutation has significant ideological consequences in that the real social contradictions in class society are transformed into problems of individual perception. Class struggle is idealized into conflicting points of view,

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sights and oversights in vision, everything becoming a matter of the individual subject's true or false acts of seeing. Thus in Hardy's writing class and gender conflicts appear as conflicts of perception in the multifarious acts of seeing of the characters who inhabit Wessex. By endowing the imaginary world with a richness and complexity which resembles the real world (but does not reflect it) the writing produces the possibility for an infinite number of acts of sight to take place involving not only the characters but also the writer and the readers. However, it was not Hardy's intention that a true mode of perception be found *in* the writing but that true perception, the insight into the real, be produced *by* the writing in the consciousness of the subject who attentively peruses it. In this way production (writing) determines consumption (reading) by casting the reader in the role of seer. This determination operates in such a way that Hardy's language appears as the 'bearer' of the seen, involving the reader in a complex network of points of view. Many of Hardy's so-called stylistic infelicities are due to this peculiar use of language which strives not so much to produce an image of a character or a scene as to set up a determinate relationship between seer and seen in order that 'the real' be made visible. It is in the endless diversity of these subject-centred perceptions of the world, in the difference between the points of view of an infinite number of individuals that the writing achieves its ideological effect namely that of transforming social class and gender conflicts into conflicting points of view.

However, a materialist criticism does more than simply enable us to identify the writing's aesthetic project, it enables us to grasp the productive nature of writing itself. In the present case what materialist criticism enables us to see is that by evoking a mode of perception which turns a whole world into an object of contemplation for the individual consciousness, Hardy's writing produces an image of an ideological mode of appropriating reality. Quite independently of the writer's intention the writing produces a *scenario* of ideology in action, ideology actually functioning as the acts of sight of perceiving subjects. In this *scenario* of conflicting points of view what individuals see is dependent on how they are ideologically addressed and constituted (interpellated) as subjects in and by ideologies of class and gender. While these ideologies are them-

selves a part of the means of production for Hardy's writing, the writing does not simply reflect or represent them but actually puts them into contradiction. It does this in two main ways. First, by confronting the sovereignty of the subject—which the subjective mode of perception signifies—with a totally different way of seeing dependent on the community of the working people of Wessex; second, by confronting those ideological discourses which spoke of 'the progress of civilization and the improvement in the moral sentiments of mankind'⁴ by a structure of perceptions in which 'womankind' is perceived as 'mankind's' lesser Other. In Hardy's writing the harmonizing ideological discourses of the Victorian bourgeoisie are brought into head-on conflict with the alter-ideology of women as the *sexus sequior*, the inferior, or in its genteel Victorian version, weaker sex. As Göran Therborn has suggested, in the relations of power and domination 'the alter-ideology of the dominating subjects is translated into attempts to mould the dominated according to the rulers' image of them'.⁵ Time and again we find that it is precisely such images which intervene into the individual's vision of an harmonious conjunction of consciousness and being to distort and disrupt a desired unity. In Hardy's writing these images are put into play by a specific structure of perceptions.

These ideological considerations should not, however, obscure the fact that a materialist criticism starts out from the premise that the production of Hardy's writing is rooted in, and emerges out of, the contradiction between an historical process and an historical moment. That is, as I shall show, the contradiction between the long process of the separation of the producer from the means of production, which constituted the basis of the development of capitalism in Britain, and the effects of the Great Depression on the economic and social structure of the counties of south-west England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But this is not to say that Hardy's writing 'reflects' history. History is not writing's raw material; the primary material upon which the labour of writing is expended is not the conflict between the relations of production and the material forces of production, but the ideological forms in which people become conscious of that conflict and 'fight it out'. In Hardy's case the ideological forms are those of his class of origin

and those of the intellectual grouping to which he gave the name 'the thinking world'.⁶ While there are certain similarities between the contradictions inherent in the *class situation* of the small producer or petty bourgeois in terms of its inherent instability as a transitional class, its very existence guaranteed only by a compromise between the antagonistic classes between which it is uneasily situated, and the *ideological* compromise formation elaborated in the ideological discourses of 'the thinking world', there is a radical difference between the experiential knowledge and customary forms of the one and the utopian idealism of the other, between the harmony of 'hearts and hands' and the harmony of being and consciousness.

The aesthetic project of Hardy's writing, however, is determined by the latter, by that unique conjunction of discourses which were elaborated in the terms of an idealist philosophy, an empiricist theory of knowledge, an altruistic ethics, an undogmatic theology and a reformist politics. This peculiar ideological compromise formation expressed both the reformist will of the traditional intellectuals, expressed in the utopian desire to change society by weakening its antagonistic extremes and transforming them into harmony, and the hope for the progressive development of the identity between social being and social consciousness. This ideological formation might well be designated by the term used by D. G. Ritchie, that is, Idealist Evolutionism.⁷

Hardy gave a personal expression to each of these ideological positions. As an 'Intrinsicist' he expressed his belief that the true political principle was a compromise, writing in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*: 'Conservatism is not estimable in itself, nor is Change, or Radicalism. To conserve the existing good, to supplant the existing bad by good, is to act on a true political principle, which is neither Conservative nor Radical.'⁸ He gave his religious beliefs the particular form of the Idea of the Universal Will, the It, becoming conscious of Itself, a form of idealism which replaced 'the old Transcendental Ideals' with the 'Idealism of Fancy'.⁹ We find his altruistic views contained in his belief in evolutionary meliorism and in his 'doctrine' of the Universe growing 'sympathetic', a belief reinforced by the law of evolution which, he wrote, 'shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively'.¹⁰ Philo-

sophically he inclined to the Kantian compromise between materialism and idealism, his perception of reality being determined by the empiricist problematic of knowledge which he expressed as the search for the essence of the real in apparent reality.

In so far as Hardy believed that the function of the artist was to draw aside the veil of the apparent, he defined himself as a seer whose art was not concerned with the mirroring of reality or the expression of ideas, but with seeing into the structure of the real. Such perception, arrived at through the operation of the 'imaginative reason', he believed to constitute the true function of art and was true realism. He wrote that 'the seer should watch the pattern among things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. That is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.'¹¹ This is the imaginative reason at work, an intervention on the writer's part, an act of 'disproportioning—(i.e. distorting; throwing out of proportion)—of realities', to show more clearly the features that matter in these realities'.¹² Through this intervention Hardy believed that true art *produced the effect* of essential reality, writing that 'Art is the secret of how to produce by a false thing the effect of a true.'¹³ This 'reality effect' is produced by 'true Art's' ability to draw aside the veil of the apparent and allow the clear sighted reader a vision of the truth and is the basis of the aesthetic project of Hardy's writing.

There is, however, a crucial and determining link between the production of Hardy's writing and its reproduction in the discourse of criticism which has ensured a remarkable ideological continuity over the period of a hundred years since the publication of the first novels. This is due to the fact that those critical discourses which have produced Hardy's writing as Literature are themselves determined by the same empiricist and idealist problematic as that which determined Hardy's own aesthetic project. Through its revelation of the truth, criticism 'realizes' Hardy's 'moments of vision' through its own special procedures. There is, in consequence, an homology between the contradictory modes of perception in Hardy's writing and the conflicting 'critical' perceptions in the discourses of aesthetic ideology, that is, between the writing's aesthetic project and the