HARDY & THE SISTER ARTS

Joan Grundy

HARDY AND THE SISTER ARTS

Joan Grundy

M

First published 1979 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi
Dublin Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos
Melbourne New York Singapore Tokyo

Typeset in Great Britain by Santype Ltd., Salisbury

Printed in Great Britain by offset lithography by
Billing & Sons Ltd, Guildford, London and Worcester

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Grundy, Joan
Hardy and the sister arts
1. Hardy, Thomas, b.1840 – Criticism and interpretation
823'.8 PR4754

ISBN 0-333-24106-1

Preface

My published work having been hitherto mainly in the Elizabethan field, I feel in publishing a book on Hardy something of a gate-crasher, and a gate-crasher upon an already crowded party. But the fields of literature are subject to no Enclosure Act, and the works of Hardy have been a long-time love of mine. The book began as an exploration: it was written not, at first, because I had something I was burning to say, but rather because there was something I wished to find out. Briefly, I wanted to know what made Hardy so good; even what made Hardy Hardy. I was convinced that the answer lay not, as so many critics were telling me at the time, in either his philosophy, his moral standpoint, or his sociology, but rather in his art, which was still relatively ignored, belittled, or denied to exist. Seeking a more detailed knowledge of the nature of this art, of its roots and affinities, I sought also to understand it in relation to Hardy the writer's most striking single quality, that habit of compassion which in More's *Utopia* is said to be 'the most human affection of our nature'. Since that time (about nine years ago) the winds of change have blown increasingly in this direction, and works such as J. Hillis Miller's *Thomas Hardy, Distance and Desire* (1970), Penelope Vigar's *The Novels of Thomas Hardy: Illusion and Reality* (1974), and Paul Zietlow's *Moments of Vision, The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (1974) have confirmed some of my own early findings. My entire enterprise (explained more fully in the Introduction) has been most encouragingly (if unwittingly) endorsed by P. N. Furbank, in his Introduction to the

New Wessex edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where he presents a view of Hardy's achievement very close in its essential features to my own. More recently, and since my second chapter was written, two admirable treatments of the subject of Hardy's pictorial art have appeared, by F. B. Pinion in his *Thomas Hardy: Art and Thought* (1977) and by Norman Page in his *Thomas Hardy* (1977), both treatments differing considerably in scope and intention from mine, as also from each other.

All these, being more substantial than mere straws in the wind, suggest that there is a growing recognition both of the importance of Hardy's artistry, and of how much there is still to be known about it. Writers on Hardy, like diggers for treasure in the Thames mud, may be numerous, but the treasure is not yet exhausted. I hope that I have been able to recover a little more of it.

I should like to record my gratitude to the friends, colleagues, and students who have encouraged me by the interest they have shown in this work, in particular to Professor Barbara Hardy and Dr Katharine J. Worth, who each read some of it in manuscript; to Royal Holloway College, who granted me the two terms of sabbatical leave without which its completion would have been delayed much longer; and to my niece Mrs Helen Pilkington, who devotedly and uncomplainingly prepared the typescript.

Reference Abbreviations

References to the novels are to the New Wessex edition (hardback) (London, 1975). Page references for prose and verse are given only where quotations are not readily identifiable through their context. References to *The Dynasts* specify part, act and scene: thus 2.1.i signifies Part Second, Act 1, scene one.

DR	*Desperate Remedies*
UGWT	*Under the Greenwood Tree*
PBE	*A Pair of Blue Eyes*
FFMC	*Far from the Madding Crowd*
HE	*The Hand of Ethelberta*
RN	*The Return of the Native*
TM	*The Trumpet-Major*
L	*A Laodicean*
TT	*Two on a Tower*
MC	*The Mayor of Casterbridge*
W	*The Woodlanders*
TD	*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
JO	*Jude the Obscure*
WB	*The Well-beloved*
CP	*The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson, New Wessex edition (London, 1976)
SS	*The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1928)
Dyn.	*The Dynasts*, in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, vol. II: *'The Dynasts' and 'The Famous Tragedy of the Queen*

of Cornwall' (London, 1930)

Life F. E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London and New York, 1965)

Contents

1 Introduction: The Sentient Seer

In *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, chapter 25, Hardy, speaking through his wife Florence Emily, the nominal author of the work, answers the critics who at the publication of *Wessex Poems* in 1898 were sceptical of his 'modulation' from prose to poetry. There was, he suggests, 'in the art-history of the century . . . an example staring them in the face of a similar modulation from one style into another by a great artist', namely Verdi. And he (or his wife) continues,

> But probably few literary critics discern the solidarity of all the arts. Curiously enough Hardy himself dwelt upon it in a poem that seems to have been little understood, though the subject is of such interest. It is called 'Rome: The Vatican: Sala delle Muse'; in which a sort of composite Muse addresses him.

The poem, first published in *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901) and dated 1887, runs as follows:

> I sat in the Muses' Hall at the mid of the day,
> And it seemed to grow still, and the people to pass away,
> And the chiselled shapes to combine in a haze of sun,
> Till beside a Carrara column there gleamed forth One.
>
> She looked not this nor that of those beings divine,
> But each and the whole – an essence of all the Nine;

With tentative foot she neared to my halting-place,
A pensive smile on her sweet, small, marvellous face.

'Regarded so long, we render thee sad?' said she.
'Not you,' sighed I, 'but my own inconstancy!
I worship each and each; in the morning one,
And then, alas! another at sink of sun.

'To-day my soul clasps Form; but where is my troth
Of yesternight with Tune: can one cleave to both?'
– 'Be not perturbed,' said she. 'Though apart in fame,
As I and my sisters are one, those, too, are the same.'

– 'But my love goes further – to Story, and Dance, and Hymn,
The lover of all in a sun-sweep is fool to whim –
Is swayed like a river-weed as the ripples run!'
– 'Nay, wooer, thou sway'st not. These are but phases of one;

'And that one is I; and I am projected from thee,
One that out of thy brain and heart thou causest to be –
Extern to thee nothing. Grieve not, nor thyself becall,
Woo where thou wilt; and rejoice thou canst love at all!'

The composite lady's appearance and affirmations are hardly enough to establish all that she and the *Life* claim for her, even with the help of Marcus Aurelius ('Be not perturbed; for all things are of the nature of the Universal' – quoted also by Paula Power in *A Laodicean*); nevertheless, the poem is interesting for what it tells us about Hardy. His Muses are not quite the usual ones; we recognise Clio and Terpsichore and Polyhymnia, but 'Form', the first named, has no exact counterpart among the Nine. Hardy seems to be combining a statement about the qualities that appeal to him in literature with an avowal of his devotion to the sister arts generally. His soul clasps Form today because he is admiring a work of sculpture (the 'chiselled shapes'); at other times he finds 'the quality which makes the Apollo and the Aphrodite a charm in marble' in painting, or in narrative. The phrase occurs in his essay on 'The Profitable Reading of Fiction', where a little earlier he had written,

Probably few of the general body denominated the reading public

> consider, in their hurried perusal of novel after novel, that, to a masterpiece in story there appertains a beauty of shape, no less than to a masterpiece in pictorial or plastic art, capable of giving to the trained mind an equal pleasure.[1]

The thoughtlessness of the reading public as described here resembles that of the critics censured in the *Life*: both groups in their experience of art are in Hardy's view missing a great deal by their rigidly compartmentalised approach.

The poem seems to be more, however, than simply an avowal of the principle of synaesthesia, or *Ut pictura poesis*. Not only, according to this 'essence of the Nine', are all the arts fused, or capable of fusion, in any particular work of art, whatever its medium ('I and my sisters are one'), but the constituent elements of those arts, represented here by Form, Tune, Story, Dance and Hymn, are one and the same, being all of them projections from the poet's own brain and heart – 'Extern to thee nothing'. The subjectivism of the latter part of this argument is confirmed elsewhere in Hardy's critical writings, as when, for instance, he writes of the incidents of Barnes's lyrics that 'they are tinged throughout with that golden glow – "the light that never was" – which art can project upon the commonest things'.[2] But the lines may also be taken as a restatement of Hardy's oft-repeated, indeed his central, artistic principle, that art is a matter of the artist's personal impressions, an expression of 'what appeals to [his] own individual eye and heart in particular', and the work of art itself, though it involves a 'going to Nature', 'no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind' (*Life*, 184, 153). The unifying factor, making Form, Tune and the rest one and the same, is therefore no doubt emotion. Hardy can worship all the Muses because they are all vehicles of emotion; and this is true whether the allusion is to the practice of the art or simply to its enjoyment. 'The Poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel emotively', Hardy wrote in 1908 (*Life*, 342). And it is worth observing that when he refurbished his unsigned review of Barnes's *Poems of Rural Life* (October, 1879), for an obituary essay in the *Athenaeum* (October, 1886), he altered his statement concerning 'the light that never was' from 'which art can project' to 'which the emotional art of the lyrist can project', which, although by contracting the general term 'art' to 'the art of the lyrist' it seems more limiting, gains in significance from the use of the word 'emotional' in relation

to the artist's 'projections'.[3]

The composite Muse may also represent ideal beauty. In this respect the poem recalls Hardy's treatment of the theme of the pursuit of the Well-Beloved, both in the novel and in the lyric of that name. The 'Shape' who appears to the speaker in the lyric seems a counterpart in the sphere of human experience to what the Muse is in the realm of art, and Hardy worshipping the Muse in all her various guises is like Jocelyn Pierston loving 'the masquerading creature wherever he found her', whether in the three Avices, Marcia, 'Lucy, Jane, Flora, Evangeline, or what-not'. Hardy does not mention beauty in the poem, except possibly by implication in 'her sweet, small, marvellous face', but it seems unthinkable that the idea was not present in his mind. Beauty always mattered a great deal to him: this is obvious alike from his artistic practice; from his regard for woman's beauty, which makes him morbidly, even cruelly, sensitive to its withering; and from his various reflections on the subject, such as that art lies in making Nature's defects 'the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty', or that 'To find beauty in ugliness is the province of the poet' (*Life*, 114, 213).

The poem, then, whatever its intrinsic merits, has some value as a commentary on Hardy's own art, and offers me a convenient starting-point for the argument I wish to pursue. This study began as an attempt to answer certain questions that puzzled me. Liking Hardy all my life, I found that I did not much care for the critical study of him, either my own or that of others. His merits and defects seemed alike obvious, writ large and frequently repeated. Did the difficulty of probing his work arise, then, from the fact that there was nothing there to probe? Was he indeed merely the superlatively gifted and literate popular writer some have held him to be, and should I in my regard for him simply rejoice to concur with the common reader, acknowledging that romance, sensationalism, and an emotional wallow in attractive surroundings were irresistible to us both? It seemed the sensible course; and yet an obstinate impression remained with me that where all seemed surface there was in fact depth; that Hardy's apparent simplicity concealed a real complexity. It was to test this impression that I embarked on this study; to test its validity by attempting to discover the nature of that complexity, supposing it to exist. And the conclusion I have come to is that Hardy's work has indeed at once the simplicity and complexity of life itself, of the actual

process of living; and that it has it in part at least because Hardy's method of creation involves the fusion of several different arts to create an illusion of living. His adoption of this method is partly deliberate, partly instinctive, or, to use Hardy's preferred word, intuitive. Beyond the art-concealing art on which he prided himself there was a further art, concealed even from him.

Throughout all his work, whether prose, verse, or drama, Hardy has one theme, and one theme only, namely what Angel Clare calls 'this hobble of being alive'. This theme he seeks to render with complete fidelity, not the photographic fidelity of a Zola but an imaginative fidelity that selects and intensifies in order to achieve a heightened verisimilitude. Being alive involves being 'an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations' (*TD*, 119). This is the central, inescapable involvement which each individual faces alone and in isolation, 'each dwelling all to himself in the hermitage of his own mind' (*TM*, 120). But it also involves being in a place, an environment ('this planet', Europe, Wessex), and surrounded by a set of circumstances which 'hit upon the little cell called your life' (*JO*, 42), thus modifying and partly determining the nature of the 'existence, experience', etc., although without reducing its uniqueness and isolation as *felt*. This environment is itself composed very largely of other, similar 'existences': each separate existence has its part in the whole, helping to form the environment of its fellows. In doing so, each becomes an object of contemplation for the rest: the being who is for himself 'an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations' is for others a thought or an image. The most eloquent exposition of this idea in Hardy's prose comes from Cytherea Graye in chapter 13 of *Desperate Remedies*, but it is also, as will be recognised, fundamental to many of his poems and an essential part of his vision. Between the two modes of being, the 'existence' one is to oneself and the 'thought' one is to others, there is an unbridgeable gap: as Cytherea says of the world outside,

> they will not feel that what to them is but a poor thought, easily held in those two words of pity, "Poor girl!" was a whole life to me; as full of hours, minutes, and peculiar minutes, of hopes and dreads, smiles, whisperings, tears, as theirs: that it was my world, what is to them their world, and they in that life of mine, however much I cared for them, only as the thought I seem to them to be. Nobody can enter into another's

nature truly, that's what is so grievous.

There is, of course, 'a certain small minority who have sensitive souls' (*Life*, 185) who will appreciate this state of affairs and through fellow-feeling go some way towards remedying, or at any rate ameliorating, it. And lovers may occasionally achieve 'that complete mutual understanding' known to Jude and Sue, 'in which every glance and movement was as effectual as speech for conveying intelligence between them', making them 'almost the two parts of a single whole' (*JO*, 304). Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the isolated existence remains: 'You are you and I am I'; thought may bring insight and compassion, but it can never actually become flesh. The 'hobble' of being alive relates to other causes besides this, of course: notably to the Unfulfilled Intention and the cruelty and injustice of Circumstance, or of one creature to another. But the loneliness so fundamental to the experience of Hardy's heroes has its roots here. For Hardy, no less than for Cowper or Virginia Woolf, 'We perish, each alone', as even those 'two parts of a single whole', Jude and Sue, discover in the end.

A further, painful complication arises from the fact that the individual 'existence, experience', etc., is also an image, not simply in the minds of those contemplating it, but also, in some sense, actually in itself, through the transitoriness of life. 'But O, the intolerable antilogy / Of making figments feel!' This cry of the Pities in *The Dynasts* echoes throughout Hardy's work. The intolerableness for the sentient being comes through his sentience. His awareness of himself as a figment, a mere image-existence, is relatively limited (he is 'self-unconscious', 'self-unseeing'), although it comes upon him increasingly with age as he looks back on his past selves, as Hardy does in the poem 'Wessex Heights', for example. But essentially the imagistic nature of existence, its fragility and ephemerality, is felt by him through his perception of it in others. Thus this second mode of being – as a thought in the mind of others – itself becomes assimilated to the 'structure of sensations' (predominantly painful ones): each of us, by being a mere figment, becomes potentially a source of painful experience to our fellows, by the painful knowledge we offer. In our apprehension of life, seeing the feeling are intimately related. Comprehending our fellow-creatures inevitably only as thoughts or images, we can never truly *feel* their existences. We can, however, both feel and perceive the poignancy of them.

Hardy himself is haunted by his sense of the countless individual existences that are, have been, or will be, most of them so infinitely incomprehensible as realities, though knowable as facts. Even the 'old and dry mud-splashes from long-forgotten rains' that disfigure the spring-cart in which Æneas Manston is driven after his capture at the end of *Desperate Remedies* give him, one surmises, an almost metaphysical shudder. Like Keats's Grecian urn, they 'tease him out of thought, as doth Eternity': that is why he mentions them. Similarly with the 'infinite cows and calves of bygone years, now passed to an oblivion almost inconceivable in its profundity' which in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* have rubbed the posts of Dairyman Crick's sheds to a glossy smoothness with their flanks; with the 'spinning leaves' of the poem 'The Later Autumn', which

> join the remains shrunk and brown
> Of last years display
> That lie wasting away,
> On whose corpses they earlier as scorners gazed down
> From their aery green height

or with the 'Proud Songsters' piping 'As if all Time were theirs':

> These are brand-new birds of twelve-months' growing,
> Which a year ago, or less than twain,
> No finches were, nor nightingales,
> Nor thrushes,
> But only particles of grain,
> And earth, and air, and rain.

All these are now, or soon will be, nothing; yet they have been, or at present are, something. And because they are, or have been, they *matter* to Hardy: we might almost say that for Hardy, as for God, the hairs of a man's head are numbered. His consciousness of the amount of feeling, thinking, experiencing, that is going on in the world is abnormally acute. Thus, on one of his periodic visits to London, in March 1888, he notes in his diary,

> Footsteps, cabs, etc., are continually passing our lodgings. And every echo, pit-pat, and rumble that makes up the general noise has behind it a motive, a prepossession, a hope, a fear, a fixed

> thought forward; perhaps more – a joy, a sorrow, a love, a revenge. (*Life*, 206)

Probably Hardy's best-known pronouncement on his own art is the entry made in his notebook on 3 January 1886: 'My art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc., so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible' (*Life*, 177). It is not, I think, often noticed that this is to be linked with an entry for the previous day:

> Cold weather brings out upon the faces of people the written marks of their habits, vices, passions, and memories, as warmth brings out on paper a writing in sympathetic ink. The drunkard looks still more a drunkard when the splotches have their margins made distinct by frost, the hectic blush becomes a stain now, the cadaverous complexion reveals the bone under, the quality of handsomeness is reduced to its lowest terms.

The juxtaposition is instructive; it enlarges the phrase, 'the expression of things', confirming us in our impression that Hardy is speaking of an art which represents the internal in and through the external. The association of warmth ('intensifying') with cold brings us momentarily close to Yeats's view of art, to his 'It must be packed in ice', and his poem 'cold and passionate as the dawn'. We may also be reminded of Hopkins: 'Self flashes off frame and face'. It does this at all times for Hopkins, whereas for Hardy it requires special, heightened conditions; when these are not present, what we see is not the self, or at any rate not the self at its most complete and absolute, but at best a pale superficial 'reading' of the external clues.

It is this approach to the internal through the external which gives the quality of substantiality to Hardy's art. Impressions may, as he insists so often, be all that we are capable of receiving in life and all that he as an artist is able to express, but the impressions themselves have all the appearance of being solid and substantial. As Lionel Johnson says, 'he gives us the comfortable sense of dealing with realities'.[4] He is able to do this because his own grasp of what he calls 'the substance of life' is so thorough. He knows things by their shape and touch, sight, sound, and smell: his senses are keen. Even Time is apprehended in this material way: 'To-day has length, breadth, thickness, colour, smell, voice.

As soon as it becomes *yesterday* it is a thin layer among many layers, without substance, colour, or articulate sound' (*Life*, 285).

The qualities that define 'to-day' derive essentially from its events, from the happenings and experiences it contains. These are important to Hardy, for they help to define human beings also. We are known to others through our actions and speeches, through 'shape and voice and glance' (*CP*, 144), but life itself is known to us through experience and event, and we are in part, for ourselves if not for others, the sum-total of our experiences. (Only in part, of course; our innate impulses and desires help to make up the balance.) The celebrated poem 'Afterwards' provides an illustration: here Hardy wonders whether, when his 'tremulous stay' is over, he will be defined aright through the things he has seen and heard and cared for: 'He was a man who used to notice such things.'

This last point is particularly relevant to Hardy's treatment of the personages in his novels. These have unmistakably the breath of life in them: they are shrewdly observed and embody subtle psychological insights. And this is true not only of his most celebrated character-creations, the heroes and heroines of his major novels, but also of the relatively less well-known ones, people such as Elfride, Henry Knight and Parson Swancourt, or Anne Garland and her mother. All of these have a well-authenticated and convincing individual life. Yet of all of them, major and minor figures alike, it could be said that the psychological strength of the portrayal comes more through intuition, whether in the form of a sudden flash of insight or of a flow of sympathy 'gentle but continual', than it does through analysis. Hardy does not really go in for character-*study*: he does not, that is, reveal the thought-processes of his characters in any detail. Or, if he does so, we may feel conscious of a gap, if not actually a discrepancy, between the character as described and the character as shown. 'His countenance was overlaid with legible meanings' Hardy tells us in his set-piece introducing Clym Yeobright. These 'legible meanings' he proceeds to read for us. In doing so, however, he tells us far more than we ever see in action: the legible meanings remain on the countenance only. In his behaviour towards Eustacia and his mother he is simply the perennial male, and his 'face' in this respect is that of the past as much as of the future. ('In Clym Yeobright's face could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future', Book Third begins.) Clym 'lives' by reason of his emotional experience