

# THE ART OF THOMAS HARDY

BY LIONEL JOHNSON

TO WHICH IS ADDED A CHAPTER ON  
THE POETRY BY J. E. BARTON AND  
A BIBLIOGRAPHY BY JOHN LANE  
TOGETHER WITH A NEW PORTRAIT BY  
VERNON HILL AND THE ETCHED  
PORTRAIT BY WILLIAM STRANG

LONDON

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD.

1923

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THIS book was originally published in 1894, the first of many dealing with Mr. Hardy's works.

At that time, though *Jude the Obscure* was still unfinished, Mr. Hardy had long been hailed as one of our most distinguished living novelists, his fourth novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, having brought him not merely a name, but popularity.

In 1894, however, his reputation as a poet was still to make. Much of his earliest work—I have been told on good authority, the entire work of two years—was in verse, but of this everything, with the exception of one poem, was destroyed. It was not until 1898 that Mr. Hardy at the age of fifty-eight (he was born on June 2, 1840) issued his first volume of poetry under the title of *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, and with the exception of a collection of short stories every volume appearing from his pen in the last quarter of a century has been in verse, until to-day, in his eighty-third year, he is regarded by many not only as our greatest living novelist, but also as our greatest living poet. What a record!

*The Art of Thomas Hardy*, though long since out of print, is still eagerly sought after by Hardy enthusiasts. Lionel Johnson, who was born on March 15, 1867, and died on October 4, 1902, at the age of thirty-

five, was a brilliant critic and his discerning appreciation is as valuable to-day as it was in the nineties. In response to many inquiries I should doubtless have republished the volume long ago, but for my feeling that a book with such a title demanded a section dealing with Mr. Hardy's great and still growing reputation as a poet. At last, however, I have been fortunate enough to enlist the services of Mr. J. E. Barton, the Headmaster of Bristol Grammar School, whom I have known for some years as an enthusiastic admirer and withal a discriminating critic of Mr. Hardy's poems, and I believe that the chapter contributed by him will fully justify my selection.

When this book was first planned I arranged for Mr. Hardy to sit to the late William Strang, then a young artist, for the powerful etching which was used as a frontispiece. Many connoisseurs have considered this to be Strang's finest etched portrait, and it certainly did much to popularize his portraiture.

For this reprint Mr. Hardy has again consented to sit for his portrait, this time to Mr. Vernon Hill. Both portraits will now adorn the work.

A word remains to be added on the subject of the bibliography.

Bibliography has now become an exact science and altogether too exacting for a busy publisher personally to undertake. Besides, there are already in existence two or three excellent Hardy bibliographies which I have no desire to supersede. The one, therefore, compiled by me for the first edition of this work will not be reprinted in its original form, as I

have decided to make it a bibliography of first editions only, and the titles of short stories and poems will all be included in the contents list under the title of each volume, so that any given story or poem can be located at a glance.

To this I have added when possible the dates of the various poems, the notes, traditions, and sources when given of the subject dealt with, also what is perhaps of even greater importance, the places where the poems and stories were written, for it will be generally admitted that a knowledge of the *genius loci* is as important for the study of Mr. Hardy's work as it is in the case of Scott, Kingsley, and Blackmore. It is indeed possible to argue that the spirit of place dominates his poems more than those of any other great English poet. Would that some Irish poet and romancer might arise who would achieve for Ireland what Scott has done for Scotland, Kingsley and Blackmore for Devon, and Thomas Hardy for the kingdom of Wessex.

The poem, *The Fire at Tranter Sweatley's*, has been omitted from the present volume because it is now reprinted in *Wessex Poems*, but the very useful note on Dialect and the admirable article on Barnes have been retained as these are not to be found in any of Mr. Hardy's volumes. I have also included the note on Anatole France which appeared in the Press when that distinguished author was entertained in London in 1913.

A tribute of admiration is also due to Mr. Hardy for the exquisite designs drawn by him and repro-

viii THE ART OF THOMAS HARDY

duced in the *Wessex Poems*—they are worthy of a place among the works of the 'Little Masters' at least, and it may perhaps cause many lovers of the graphic arts to regret that Mr. Hardy should have forsaken the pencil for the pen.

My grateful thanks are due to Mr. Edmund Gosse, C.B., Miss Margaret Lavington, Mr. Clement Shorter, Mr. Stanton Whitfield, Mr. J. Carroll, Mrs. Paul Taylor, and Mr. Thomas Wise for their very valuable assistance in the revision of the bibliography.

JOHN LANE.

THE BODLEY HEAD,  
LONDON, *March* 1923.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

It is held, upon all hands, that to write about the works of a living writer is a difficult and a delicate thing : I have felt the inevitable difficulty ; I have tried to preserve the becoming delicacy. Throughout these essays upon the works of Mr. Hardy, there will be found, I trust, no discourtesy in my censure : I trust still more, no impertinence in my praise. Dr. Johnson assigned two meanings to the word *Critick* ; in the first place, it means ' A man skilled in the business of judging of literature ; a man able to distinguish the faults and beauties of writing ' : in the second place, it means ' A snarler ; a carper ; a caviller.' This evil kind of critic is prettily described by Drayton :

' This Critick so sterne,  
But whom, none must discern  
Nor perfectly have seeing,  
Strangely layes about him,  
As nothing without him  
Were worthy of being.'

But there is another critic, equally abhorrent : a creature of adulation, prying and familiar, whose criticism is founded upon personal gossip about his victims : a rude fellow, who holds a writer's private life and

history, to be public concerns. To all such *canaille écrivante*, I would apply these verses of Cowper :

‘The man who hails you Tom, or Jack,  
And proves by thumping on your back,  
His sense of your great merit,  
Is such a friend, that one had need  
Be very much his friend indeed,  
To pardon or to bear it.’

All varieties of evil criticism flourish exceedingly in books upon the works of living writers : so many and so great are the vices incident to them, that some judicious persons would have them discouraged altogether. Yet there is much to be said on their behalf : somewhat of this kind. Most of us accept with equanimity the reviews, the journals, the magazines, which contain an abundance of criticism upon living writers ; criticism, of necessity hastier, than the criticism contained in a deliberate book. But reviews, I may be told, and journals, and magazines, are published for the passing day : a book makes the greater pretension to some lasting value. The reply had its force, did all journals die with the day, the week, the month, the quarter, of their production : did all books remain ever in the public way. But the review, be it good or bad, once published, is indestructible ; posterity can excavate it from the stores of newspapers in libraries and in museums ; can light upon it among the volumes of old magazines ; *litera scripta*, it must remain. Ephemeral it may be, in value ; it cannot be ephemeral, in duration : whilst for such books, as this of mine, I claim

that, if they be worthless, they will but exist in equal obscurity with the reviews, an offence to no one ; and that, if they have some little value, they may, by the more careful workmanship and preparation, which alone can justify them, be of greater interest and worth, than the criticism produced under conditions, not so favourable to thought and care.

But the reviews, it may be urged, deal with a writer's books, singly and in succession, without attempting to consider his life's work, as though it were ended ; they remember, that he may yet write a great number of books : it is premature to write a book about a living writer's books : he may write books of so new and fresh a kind, as wholly to overthrow his critic's general positions. Certainly, that is possible : and, certainly, it is improbable. But, be it so or not so, when a writer has published fifteen volumes, the critic is at no loss for materials of criticism. Mr. Hardy may write as many works, as Sophocles or Shakespeare, Voltaire or Goethe, Balzac or Hugo, Dumas or Scott : that does not deter me from considering, nor from expressing, the character of his fifteen published works : for I make no silly claim to pass sentence upon them, to determine their absolute value, to assign them their rank and place. It amply contents me to dream, that some gentle scholar of an hundred years hence, turning over the worn volumes upon bookstalls yet unmade, may give his pence for my book, may read it at his leisure, and may feel kindly towards me. For we look back with eagerness upon memories of the *Mermaid Tavern* and of the *Apollo Room*, of *Will's* and of *Button's* and



of *The Club* : we are grateful to Drummond of Hawthornden, to Boswell, and to Spence : and this, because we love to know how the great, or the little, writers of those days were esteemed by the great, or by the little, critics. Criticism of living writers need not be presumptuous, nor impertinent ; let the critic feel but the reverence of a novice in the tribes of Ben, of Dryden, of Addison, of Pope, of Johnson ; he may take heart of grace, and speak his mind upon the seeming masters of his own day. I do not know, that he will do well to think much about the ' Science of Criticism ' : about the ' Science of Fiction,' Mr. Hardy has written that an attempt to set it forth ' is to write a whole library of human philosophy, with instructions how to feel.' I have but brought to these essays the best of my thought and of my knowledge : remembering, how it is held, upon all hands, a difficult and a delicate thing, to write about the works of a living writer.

LIONEL JOHNSON.

CADGWITH : 1892.

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
PUBLISHER'S NOTE, . . . . .	v
AUTHOR'S PREFACE, . . . . .	ix
I. CRITICAL PRELIMINARIES, . . . . .	I
II. DESIGN AND COMPOSITION, . . . . .	35
III. WESSEX, . . . . .	83
IV. COUNTRY FOLK, . . . . .	122
V. CHARACTERS OF MEN AND WOMEN, . . . . .	167
VI. SINCERITY IN ART, . . . . .	208
THE POETRY OF THOMAS HARDY, . . . . .	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY, . . . . .	297
WILLIAM BARNES : A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE . . . . .	347

## ILLUSTRATIONS

PORTRAIT BY VERNON HILL, . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
ETCHING BY STRANG, . . . . .	<i>facing page 257</i>

# THE ART OF THOMAS HARDY

## I

### CRITICAL PRELIMINARIES

LITERATURE has commonly been called humane, by way of precept and of praise: if that fact be well taken to heart, it rebukes our solitary pride in our own works, and it calms our feverish concern for our own times: it fills the mind with a cheering sense of security and of companionship. In the humanities of literature, its various occupation with the whole mind of man, consist its value and its power: and the famous phrase in Terence, which declares the natural sympathy of man with man, serves further to declare the natural sphere of men's most natural art, the art of letters. The most enduring things, in a world of growth and change, are the human passions and the human sentiments: it is the office of good literature, the distinction of classical literature, to give form in every age to the age's human mind. Knowledge increases; the history of one age is the intellectual inheritance of the next: the sciences appear to conquer the natural world, and the philosophies attempt the mysterious: but literature must always have a supreme care for those original

elements of human passion, and of human sentiment, which knowledge trains, and experience educates, without changing their essential quality. Life, in contact with the passions and with the emotions of men, and so provoking their minds to expression, is the occasion, the origin, of literature. From Homer or Virgil, to Wordsworth or Goethe, the great books and utterances tell all one story, under diverse forms : with accumulating wealth of matter, and with increasing complexity of thought, but with the same animating spirit of ' fair humanities.' To the apprehensions of some hasty and impatient minds, the lucid wisdom of the ancients is poor and stale : the Eastern sages, the Greek tragedians, Homer and Pindar, Theognis and Herodotus, Virgil and Horace, Hafiz and Omar : how much of all these seems flat and frigid, mere proverb, parable, allegory, personification ! For our century has in succession enjoyed the *Welt-Schmerz* of Germany, and the *Névrose* of France : an immense and desolate melancholy from Russia, a perverse and astringent misery from Scandinavia. We ' refine upon our pleasures,' as Congreve has it ; and our refinement takes the form of that paradoxical humour, which confounds pleasure with pain, and vice with virtue. It is a sick and haggard literature, this literature of throbbing nerves and of subtle sensations ; a literature, in which clearness is lost in mists, that cloud the brain ; and simplicity is exchanged for fantastic ingenuities. Emotions become entangled with the consciousness of them : and after-thoughts or impressions, laboured analysis

or facile presentation, usurp the place of that older workmanship, which followed nature under the guidance of art. Ages of decay, seasons of the falling leaf, are studied for love of their curious fascination, rather than ages of growth and of maturity: 'the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome,' are chiefly welcomed in the persons of those writers, whom it is convenient to style *Cantores Euphorionis*. Literature, under such auspices, must lose half its beauty, by losing all its humanity: it ceases to continue the great tradition of polite, of humane letters: it becomes the private toy of its betrayers. Many and many a book, full of curious devices, and of distorted beauties, full of hints and of suggestions, can charm our modern taste, with its indulgence, not to say its appetite, for all sorts of silly audacity: but we dare not prophesy for such books an immortality, nor contemplate them by the side of the classics. Yet the classics, of all ages and in all tongues, are a catholic company: in their fellowship is room for comers from the four winds, laden with infinitely various gifts and treasures. But, as the Church Catholic, *la seule Église qui a mis l'humanité dans sa voie*, embracing Tauler and Saint Teresa, excludes Swedenborg and Behmen: so too acts the catholic company of the classics. Diversity is admirable: perversity is detestable: the distinction may be delicate, but it is decisive, and separates, according to the judgment of time, the cleverness of to-day, from the genius, that is at home throughout the centuries. I profess my faith in too many writers

of this age, to accuse myself of a backward tendency in my appreciations, of an over conservative spirit in my attempts upon criticism: but at the outset of these essays, and before I venture to approach the art of Mr. Hardy, I wish to declare my loyalty to the broad and high traditions of literature; to those humanities, which inform with the breath of life the labours of the servants, and the achievements of the masters, in that fine art. There are theorists, who maintain the absolute independence of the artist; his 'unchartered freedom' from all traditions, and from all influences; his isolated station, his spontaneous powers: and there are theorists, who maintain the entire dependence of the artist upon hereditary impulse, upon circumstantial influence, upon local forces, and upon social tendencies; they rob him of his originality, that they may fit him into their theory. The great name of Carlyle, and the distinguished name of M. Taine, may stand sponsors for the two doctrines. And yet the truth would seem to lie between these two desperate extremities, of plenary inspiration and of mechanical necessity: between that doctrine, which detaches the artist from his fellow men; and that doctrine, which forbids them to see, even in the artist, an example of free and of creative will. At the least, it is of interest to consider the middle position: to contemplate the artist, the man of letters, in his relation to past times and to his own, with something of a Positivist spirit, tempered by a saving disbelief in Positivism. The result of such a meditation might

be of this kind ; with due allowance for 'accidental variations.'

The supreme duties of the artist toward his art, as of all workmen toward their work, are two in number, but of one kind : a duty of reverence, of fidelity, of understanding, toward the old, great masters ; and a duty of reverence, of fidelity, of understanding, toward the living age and the living artist. There are times, when the two duties are hard to reconcile ; when the artistic conscience must put forth all its honest casuistry, and determine the true solution with laborious care. The law of restraint seems to say one thing : and the liberty of power, another. Is this, asks the artist of his conscience, a fine discovery of beauty, a fine exercise of strength ? or is it a temptation, a vicious thing disguised, for the moment, in the semblance of beauty and of strength ? Am I dishonouring art, by the rejection of fine chances ? or honouring art, by obedience to fine traditions ? As the artist decides, so does he find his salvation, or pronounce his own sentence of failure : if he decide well, his work is alive, vigorous, and sure. But the difficulty of decision ! for it requires no less than a science, to lay at rest questions of the artistic conscience : a knowledge of the ends of art, an insight into the perplexed issues, the tangled ideas, which beset the artist's mind, and confound his plain morality. It is not in estimates of the past, that the difficulties come : it is in estimates of the present. That the habit and the drift of our own age are good, and to be praised, who shall assure



us? The facts of life, its energies and activities in play about us, we can recognize with some clearness; and the fashions, ventures, experiments, of contemporary artists are almost too prominently in sight. But we require a touchstone and a test; some image, as it were, of that 'perfect state' which lieth in the heavens,' seen there by Plato, 'eternal in the heavens,' proclaimed by Paul; before we can accept with joy, and follow with readiness, the ways of our living age, of our living artists. And in the old, great masters, and even in the excellent, old writers of less excellence, we have our test, a test of the widest application, whereby to assay ourselves and others. For, *securus iudicat orbis terrarum*: sure and sound is the whole world's judgment: in Homer and in Virgil, in Milton and in Dante, virtue and truth shine clearly. The general voice of men, the authoritative voice of artists, go together in praise of the old, great masters. 'But they lived in their times, we live now; what have we to do with them?' asks many a man, whose illiteracy has made him petulant. Neither did the old, great masters flourish together: yet examine, I pray you, the debt of Virgil to Homer, the debt of Dante to Virgil, the debt of Milton to Dante, to Virgil, and to Homer. Do you not find it an inestimable debt of reverence, of fidelity, of understanding? Or can you discern in those masters, for the most part, any sign of a servile obedience to each other? Call it rather, not a debt due, but a grace sought and received. Great art is never out of date, nor obsolete: like the moral law of



Sophocles, 'God is great in it, and grows not old'; like the moral law of Kant, it is of equal awe and splendour with the stars. A line of Virgil, written by the Bay of Naples, in some most private hour of meditation, all those long years ago! comes home to us, as though it were our very thought: upon each repetition, experience has made it more true and touching. Or some verse of Arnold, written at Oxford or in London, some few years past: it comes home to us, as though a thousand years had pondered it, and found it true. In beauty and in strength, in beauty of music and in strength of thought, the great artists are all contemporaries: 'Vandyke is of the company,' now and always: an eternal beauty and strength are upon the great works of art, as though they were from everlasting. Be we artists then, or students merely, let us value our age and ourselves, according to the *mind* of the great masters, and in their *spirit*. 'There is but one way for me,' wrote Keats, in the very accents of Milton: 'The road lies through application, study, and thought. I will pursue it.' To his disciples in art, Sir Joshua Reynolds, sanest and most refined of English painters, gave the same counsels: 'The daily food and nourishment of the mind of an artist is found in the great works of his predecessors. There is no other way for him to become great himself. *Serpens, nisi serpentem comederit, non fit draco*, is a remark of a whimsical Natural History, which I have read, though I do not recollect its title; however false as to dragons, it is applicable enough to artists.' In his old age,