



RICHARD H. TAYLOR

THE NEGLECTED HARDY

Thomas Hardy's Lesser Novels

THE NEGLECTED HARDY

Thomas Hardy's Lesser Novels

Richard H. Taylor

M

© Richard H. Taylor 1982

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without permission

First published 1982 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 31051 9

Printed in Hong Kong

Prefatory Note

‘And did it hold your interest?’ Hardy asked Virginia Woolf of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. To the novelist that is the first criterion of judgement, and if Hardy had asked me the same question of the lesser novels the answer would have been a distinct affirmative. For this book has been inspired by the enjoyment of reading *all* Hardy’s novels and by the belief that those which are less highly esteemed are nevertheless both interesting and rewarding. At a time when studies of Hardy’s major fiction continue to proliferate at an astonishing rate, the critical focus should surely be shifted for once to the lesser novels, in which I suspect there is a growing interest. And it is this regard for some often neglected works that I hope to stimulate.

I have always been encouraged in this enterprise by my wife Pamela, whose enthusiasm and bright good spirits and humour are invaluable; my first and greatest acknowledgement of thanks must always go to her. In writing about Hardy’s lesser novels I have enjoyed the immense benefit of the wisdom, advice and friendship of Professor Kenneth J. Fielding and Mr T.R.M. Creighton, of the Department of English Literature, University of Edinburgh, as well as the great pleasure of working with them. I thank Kenneth Fielding and Tom Creighton warmly for their continuing interest and generosity.

I wish to thank the Trustees of the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection in the Dorset County Museum for their kind permission to quote from materials in the Hardy Collection. And I would like to thank Hardy friends and scholars who encouraged me to publish my studies of these lesser novels, including Dr James Gibson, Professor Ian Gregor and Dr Frank Pinion, as well as those other Hardy enthusiasts who responded so kindly to the original draft of Chapter 4, which in a slightly different form constituted a lecture I delivered on 14 August 1978 at the Summer School organised at Weymouth by the Thomas Hardy Society.

At The Macmillan Press Miss Julia Tame and Mr T.M. Farmiloe have been a constant support and courteously helpful

at every stage of planning and production, and I offer them my gratitude for all their efforts. I have enjoyed working with them and Ms Susan Metham, Mr Keith Walker and Mr Timothy Fox, whom I thank for their care and thoroughness in seeing the book through the press. Mr Roger Peers, Curator of the Dorset County Museum, has continued to be remarkably good-humoured and helpful during my researches there, and he has clearly infected his fine staff with these same qualities. And, more locally, I am grateful to Mrs Carol Fox for binding my typescript before publication, and to Miss Linda Valenti, a student whose enthusiasm for the lesser novels while writing a dissertation which I supervised had the timely effect of limiting any procrastination over finishing my own study!

Over a number of years and in different institutions in Britain and Canada I have been exceptionally fortunate in my students, with whom it has always been a delight to explore Hardy's prose and poetry. Most recently this has been at Stockwell College, a constituent college of the University of London Institute of Education. Stockwell College has long enjoyed Hardy connections: Hardy's cousin Tryphena Sparks was one of its students in 1870-1 (graduating in the first class) and Hardy himself visited the college in June 1891 (an occasion recalled in the *Life*). But Stockwell College finally closes its doors on 31 August 1980, so I dedicate this book to my Stockwell College students and colleagues. I am thinking of each one of those students, too numerous to mention individually but all remembered, with their keenness and humour and conviviality. The good friendship that can arise from close working is something that I am happy to have shared and to continue to share with them and with my colleagues. Among the latter I would like to make particular mention of Michael Blake, Jean Cardy, Mike Cooper, Bob Dixon, John Elwell, Dorothy Gulliver, Audrey Insch, Colin Mortimer, Johanna Thorpe and Joan Walmsley, for all of whom I shall always have a special affection and regard, the warmth of their friendship being more than I can tell.

June 1980

R.H.T.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout to identify frequently cited texts:

<i>L</i>	Florence Emily Hardy, <i>The Life of Thomas Hardy</i> (1962)
<i>Collected Letters</i>	R.L. Purdy and Michael Millgate (eds), <i>The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy</i> , 1 (1978)
<i>Literary Notes</i>	L.A. Björk (ed.), <i>The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy</i> , 1 (1974)
<i>One Rare Fair Woman</i>	Evelyn Hardy and F.B. Pinion (eds), <i>One Rare Fair Woman: Thomas Hardy's Letters to Florence Henniker 1893–1922</i> (1972)
<i>Personal Notebooks</i>	Richard H. Taylor (ed.), <i>The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy</i> (1979)
<i>Personal Writings</i>	Harold Orel (ed.), <i>Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings</i> (1966)
Purdy	Richard L. Purdy, <i>Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study</i> (1954)

DCM indicates the Dorset County Museum.

Contents

<i>Prefatory Note</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 ‘Well, that’s a rum story’: <i>Desperate Remedies</i> (1871)	6
3 Finding a method: <i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i> (1873)	29
4 ‘The end of the happy endings’: <i>The Hand of Ethelberta</i> (1876)	56
5 Historical consciousness and pastoral irony: <i>The Trumpet-Major</i> (1880)	76
6 ‘A man hit by vicissitudes’: <i>A Laodicean</i> (1881)	96
7 Life-loyalties: <i>Two on a Tower</i> (1882)	121
8 ‘A fanciful exhibition of the artistic nature’: <i>The Well-Beloved</i> (1892, 1897)	147
9 Conclusion	174
<i>Bibliography</i>	184
<i>Notes</i>	186
<i>Index</i>	199

1 Introduction

Hardy's lesser novels have been consistently undervalued and, though no revaluative process could elevate them to the stature of the major works, they deserve a fuller and more sympathetic reading than they have conventionally been accorded. The great novels of character and environment have cast them into shadow so that they have remained dustily elusive of serious critical examination. Yet they are worth reading and, now that at last they are available for the first time in paperback and therefore within reach of a wider audience, new readers may see that even Hardy's 'worst' novel (if such an epithet can ever be objectively applied to a work of literature) does not need any strenuous apology. And, as Edmund Gosse wrote, 'The worst chapter of *The Hand of Ethelberta* is recognisable, in a moment, as written by the author of the best chapter in *The Return of the Native*.'¹

We can see at once what he means: that a common quality informs Hardy's whole *œuvre*, the least fortunate aspects of the lesser novels as well as the most imposing features of those most highly esteemed, with a stamp of greatness. Hardy never wrote a 'bad' novel. Among the fourteen that he wrote his range is considerable, his materials and methods are diverse and his idiosyncratic experiments are often bold, but there is no failure. This may not be the conventional view, but only a reading of Hardy's work as a whole can reveal the unity and consistency of his art and his fictive world. But it is not a consistency of the kind sometimes alleged and often sought. Criticism, both individual and cumulative, has tried to define Hardy's achievement more exactly than he would have wished. His 'unadjusted impressions'² have been knitted together into fabrics that quite often do not in any real sense exist. The network is more complex than some

such studies allow and less ingenious than others predicate. 'The mission of poetry', Hardy said, 'is to record impressions, not convictions' (*L*, 377), and this stands for all his art. This is not to say that Hardy is detached or that conviction is absent: like the real firmness of Anne Garland in *The Trumpet-Major*, conviction is there, 'often unperceived at first, as the speck of colour lurks unperceived in the heart of the palest parsley flower'. But Hardy's conviction is not set out in the form of convictions, and the distinction is important. This makes him hard to pin down and define, and impossible to 'explain' in any simplistic way, but the response that his work provokes is all the more rewarding for its denial of ready definition.

It is not surprising that Hardy resists classification, either in mode or literary tradition. He is like no other novelist, and no other novelist is like him. It is not new to say that it is the unusual way in which the individual impress of Hardy's mind is made present in his work that makes it distinctive, but it is this which gives inescapable unity to all his writing. Whether or not he is consistent in his ideas is a red herring: few people are, and consistency is not necessarily a virtue. It matters more that he is consistent in his art, that *The Hand of Ethelberta*, whatever its rank as a novel, can be recognised as the work of a great writer. In view of the obvious homology of all his novels it is a typical oddity of Hardy's experience that he should be seen as notoriously uneven.

His reputation as one of the greatest novelists in the English language is based upon seven remarkable novels, only half his output of fiction; the reputation of few other modern novelists of comparable status rests on such a proportion of their work. We are left with the question: what are we to say of the other seven novels? They are traditionally regarded as minor works, as experiments and mistakes, and as being comparatively unimportant. The critical lines have been sharply drawn and without significant dissent. If a graph were mounted to show the critical acceptability of Hardy's successive novels a curious pattern of peaks and valleys would emerge, and not only at the beginning of his career. After *Far from the Madding Crowd* he wrote *The Hand of Ethelberta*; after *The Return of the Native* came *The Trumpet-Major*, *A Laodicean* and *Two on a Tower*; after three major novels, which included *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess*, he wrote *The Well-Beloved*. Either Hardy is an author of greater flexibility than the

standard account suggests or the quality of his writing is oddly variable: there is some truth in each of these contentions.

The distinctions were not so finely drawn when the novels appeared. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* could be seen in 1873 as the work of a man of genius and *A Laodicean*, now regarded as his worst novel, could be highly commended in 1881. In 1890 *The Mayor of Casterbridge* could be found less perfect in its proportions than *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Some of these verdicts may now seem eccentric, and changes in sensibility and fashion as well as critical judgement have diminished the stature of several novels since then; but even in 1906, when *The Pocket Thomas Hardy*³ was published, with selections from his prose and verse, the most numerous extracts (after *Tess* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*) came from *Desperate Remedies* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. The present modest estimation of these novels cannot be attributed only to changes in taste; nor can critical wrongheadedness be blamed, though the impression sometimes remains that the lesser novels have been read very perfunctorily. It is partly due to the remarkable qualities of the more successful novels, which have demanded and sustained extensive critical exploration and which can fairly be said to contain the centre of Hardy's achievement in prose. They represent such a major corpus of work that the remaining novels have almost inevitably been cast as a sub-group.

This derogation invites a new reading. It is surely wrong to isolate the lesser novels as separate and distinct, as aberrations and failures. They play an essential part in the dynamic process of the development of Hardy's fiction, and each stage of his career contributes to the integrity of the whole. To exclude the seven less successful novels is to distort his career and to disguise the interpenetrating unities of his fiction. Yet it is hard to approach them without prejudice, to escape the sometimes extreme and emotive critical language which has been applied to them (they have been called 'execrable', 'nonsense' and 'trash'), and to set aside the established value-judgements which may intervene between the reader and his direct engagement with the text. It may be useful, therefore, to see these novels as being different rather than inferior and to seek their peculiar and individual qualities. In this study I am deliberately reversing the traditional order of priority and inverting the usual pattern of criticism of the novels. Because these works are more substantial

than the term implies, the comparative adjective 'minor' is abjured in favour of calling them 'lesser' novels; a nicety perhaps, but one meant to escape the more pejorative assumptions that I believe attach to 'minor', and yet to acknowledge that these fictions have peculiar weaknesses as well as peculiar strengths and that an attempt has to be made to discover what distinguishes them from the major novels. The chapters that follow have been motivated and sustained by the enjoyment of reading these lesser novels and the belief that they are of unique interest to all those who value Hardy's fiction.

Since there is no doubt that the circumstances of composition and publication had an important bearing on each of Hardy's novels, the first part of each of the following chapters sets the novel in question in its context in Hardy's life and career and examines the novel's progress from genesis to publication. For the same reason contemporary criticism is invoked, since each novel's reception can be seen to have influenced Hardy's development.

Hardy's fiction has inspired a massive body of criticism and analysis, almost all of which has been devoted to the major novels. It often seems doubtful whether anything new remains to be said, though from time to time distinctive new readings and surveys emerge to surprise and delight (such as John Bayley's urbane and subtle study, *An Essay on Hardy*, in 1978). But it is fair to say that analysis of the major fiction has otherwise probably reached a point of diminishing returns. And through a century of critical endeavour certain preconceptions about Hardy's writing have, at various stages, hardened into myth: that he is a gloomy pessimist, a disciple of Schopenhauer, a topographical novelist, a bucolic antiquarian, the chronicler of agricultural decline, the author by chance of a few good poems, even that he is the author by chance of a few good novels. Of course he is much more than any of these things. It is one of the most unfortunate legends, that Hardy's lesser novels are such failures that they are scarcely worth reading, that the present study seeks to disprove. Several questions are borne in mind throughout. What value can we set upon each of these lesser novels? What do they contribute to the Hardy canon as a whole and what is their relationship to the better-known novels? What themes or other characteristics do they have in common and what can we learn from them about Hardy and the development of his art?

Conclusions are offered in a series of individual case studies which seek to discover the nature of each novel's deficiencies and (in so far as such things are discoverable) the circumstances which may have contributed to their lesser stature, and to validate what is good in them. What emerges is the way in which the lesser novels successively contribute to what I called earlier the interpenetrating unities of his fiction and, I believe, a vindication of my initial claim that Hardy never wrote a bad novel. The author's poetic description of 'Our Old Friend Dualism' seems an apt account of Hardy himself as he finally emerges from this extended discussion: 'All hail to him, the Protean! A tough old chap is he.' There is a resilience about these neglected novels as well as their author. For in their unexpected, unusual and sometimes remarkable range, written under the direction of a Protean intellect, there can be no doubt that they offer what Hardy regarded as the proper end of reading fiction for readers rightly intent upon 'getting good out of novels': 'intellectual or moral profit to active and undulled spirits'.⁴

This study does not propose a radical reappraisal of the comparative rankings of Hardy's novels, nor does it pretend to be a definitive study of these lesser works, but it does aim to be a contribution towards their rehabilitation. George Steiner once proposed an unexceptionable criterion for literary criticism: 'Criticism should open more books than it closes.' If this study proves a book-opener it will have served its purpose. For the ulterior motive of this discussion is to encourage readers to dust down and recover these neglected works from the critical attic to which they have been consigned, and consequently to discover and enjoy the individual delights which they have to offer.

2 'Well, that's a rum story': *Desperate Remedies* (1871)

1

Desperate Remedies, Hardy's first published novel, is an unlikely progenitor of a career that later included *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. It is a thriller, a Victorian sensation novel written at the end of a decade during which the most popular novels included *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), both by Wilkie Collins, whose sensational influence is shot through Hardy's novel.¹ *Desperate Remedies* is an unusual first novel in so far as it is not, in the context of the author's *œuvre*, as *The Pickwick Papers* is to Dickens, as *Mary Barton* is to Mrs Gaskell, or as *Scenes of Clerical Life* is to George Eliot. But it is emphatically not the false start that it is often claimed to be. Partly the product of chance advice, partly a pot-boiler, it is flawed but idiosyncratic. *Desperate Remedies* is a better novel, and one more characteristic of Hardy, than has been generally supposed, and hardly deserves the low critical status to which it has been assigned.

By the time it was written Hardy had been chastened by the rejection of his first novel, a sweeping socialistic satire called *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which would have introduced him even more curiously. The influences which helped to shape it were not those that inform *Desperate Remedies* but, rather, Hardy's passionate hatred of social injustice, and the reading which encouraged and fortified this animus. In 1863 Hardy commended Thackeray to his sister, describing him as 'considered to be the greatest novelist of the day – looking at novel writing of the highest kind as a perfect and truthful representation of actual life – which is no doubt the proper view to take' (*L*, 40). *Desperate Remedies* is a different matter and in it the regard for realism implicit in this respect for Thackeray is swept away by the impulse to write a different kind of novel. But in 1865 Hardy was sending his sister

Trollope's *Barchester Towers* and recommending Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*, another novel concerned with social and political life. In 1868 he was still 'reading Browning and Thackeray' (L, 57) and, as he read them, writing out *The Poor Man and the Lady*. He was attempting to achieve realism after the manner of Thackeray and on Thackeray's social level, though he later admitted how naïve this realism was in circumstantial detail, and trying to write with 'the affected simplicity' of Defoe's style (L, 61). This too is abandoned in *Desperate Remedies*, though the novel inherits Defoe's minute precision of detail and chronology, his empirical or (in Ian Watt's term) 'formal' realism. But the radicalism which had motivated *The Poor Man and the Lady* has had to be laid aside entirely.

Hardy began his first novel at Bockhampton in late summer 1867 and made his fair copy between 16 January and 9 June 1868. He had worked in London for five years but on account of weakening health in the city, where 'his languor increased month by month', had returned to work for a period with his old architectural instructor, John Hicks, in Dorchester. It was in this mood of discontent and urban *ennui* that *The Poor Man and the Lady* was conceived. His manuscript revealed no lack of confidence in attacking London society and his own lack of immediate experience therein did not restrain him. There is a telling thought among his 'Notes of 1866-67': 'The defects of a class are more perceptible to the class immediately below it than to itself.' (L, 55) But what Hardy had supposed to be satiric realism turned out to be unacceptable caricature. In a remarkably buoyant letter submitting his novel to Alexander Macmillan on 25 July 1868 Hardy claimed that his 'utterances of strong feeling' against 'the upper classes of society' had been 'inserted edgewise so to say; half concealed beneath ambiguous expressions'.² Yet the satire seemed to its few readers oppressive and ill-informed.

In the absence of the manuscript (Hardy told Vere Collins in 1921 that he had 'got rid of it' when moving), or more evidence than exists in the various fragments which are located in revised forms elsewhere in Hardy's fiction, the novel can only be judged by the story 'An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress', into which a decade later Hardy distilled all that remained of the original novel, and through the contemporary reactions of those who read it – Alexander Macmillan and John Morley, Frederick

Chapman and George Meredith. Macmillan sent Hardy a long letter on 10 August, criticising in detail the excesses and 'fatal drawbacks' of the novel: Hardy is found guilty of 'the wholesale blackening of a class' without intimate knowledge of it and without allowing the redeeming features granted it by Thackeray who, Macmillan tells Hardy, 'meant fun'. By contrast, Hardy is said to 'mean mischief'. His 'black wash will not be recognised as anything more than ignorant misrepresentation'; yet much of the writing is admirable, a scene in Rotten Row is praised, and the publisher sees Hardy as a writer 'of, at least potentially, considerable mark, of power and purpose'. His reader John Morley, while thinking the story too much 'like a clever lad's dream', describes the work as 'a very curious and original performance'.³ But the book was found unsuitable for Macmillan's list, passed on to Chapman and Hall on 8 December but rejected by them also on 8 February 1869 (unless Hardy would guarantee £20 against loss). In the following month Frederick Chapman called Hardy in to meet the reader who had read the manuscript. Unknown to Hardy, this was George Meredith, whose advice to the young author not to 'nail his colours to the mast' (*L*, 61) so uncompromisingly in a first book led Hardy to withdraw his manuscript. It was Meredith's further advice that Hardy should attempt a more complicated plot that impelled him to write *Desperate Remedies*.

Some of the defects of this sensation novel derive from the sequence of events that led to its genesis. His trials over *The Poor Man and the Lady* set the pattern for Hardy's difficulties in dealing with publishers over many years, difficulties which could not fail to have a serious effect on the manner and direction of his fiction. Hardy's immediate problem lay in trying to write a novel acceptable to Macmillan, and he had already been reprov'd for the subversiveness of *The Poor Man and the Lady*, in which his views had been 'obviously those of a young man with a passion for reforming the world' (*L*, 61). To read the correspondence between Hardy and Alexander Macmillan is moving and disturbing. A much tighter rein was imposed on Hardy than on Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* or Mrs Gaskell in *Mary Barton*: Macmillan would probably have wanted the vulgarism of the former tamed and the revolutionary character of the latter softened before he would risk them. *Desperate Remedies* was written, in a further attempt to please him, between autumn

1869 and (apart from the last four chapters) March 1870, and submitted to Macmillan on 5 March. But the publisher wrote back on 4 April rejecting the novel as being 'of far too sensational an order for us to think of publishing.'⁴ John Morley discovered in the book '*power* – at present of a violent and undisciplined kind', but he was shocked by its central incident:

But the story is ruined by the disgusting and absurd outrage which is the key to its mystery. The violation of a young lady at an evening party, and the subsequent birth of a child, is too abominable to be tolerated as a central incident from which the action of the story is to move.⁵

We cannot assess the fairness of Morley's judgement, since Hardy edited this incident out of the story. Yet it is precisely from some such event that Hardy's subject develops in both *The Poor Man* and *Desperate Remedies*, and even in the limited circles of Macmillan, Morley or the reviewer for the *Spectator* (who also took great offence at the published novel), women could be violated and have children; the passions of the past could not be dispelled by the respectable face-savers of the present. It is even less acceptable to find Macmillan, writing about *The Poor Man*, lecturing Hardy with Grundyan logic so extraordinary as to be almost comic:

Romeo and Juliet and *Hamlet* have many unnatural scenes, but Shakespeare put them in foreign countries, and took the stories from old books. When he was nearer home and his own time you don't find such things in his writing.

D. H. Lawrence's similar experience with a publisher 45 years later begs the same question about some publishers' sensibilities: 'William Heinemann said he thought *Sons and Lovers* the dirtiest book he had ever read. I should not have thought the deceased gentleman's reading had been so circumspectly narrow.'⁶ In both of Hardy's novels he was feeling his way to something difficult and disturbing but he was doubtfully helped by all the well-meant advice he received. And it was only after Hardy had contributed £75 towards its expenses that *Desperate Remedies* was eventually published, by the less-reputable house of William Tinsley,⁷ on 25 March 1871.

2

‘Now isn’t that an odd story?’

‘It is, indeed,’ Cytherea murmured. ‘Very, very strange.’

Hardy’s first published novel is distinguished by its oddity. Inspired by Meredith’s advice, but against his own judgement, to write the kind of novel he had never intended, the young author produced what one of his characters calls ‘a rum story’. And it is in the rumness and oddity that much of the work’s curious power, as well as its weakness, is found. In *Desperate Remedies* Hardy renounces his early emulation of Thackeray. In the terms of David Masson’s mid-century review of *Pendennis* and *David Copperfield*,⁸ Hardy’s novel represents a shift from the real (as represented by Thackeray) to the ideal (in the mode of Dickens), but it is the Wilkie Collins strain of idealism that it inherits. The sensation novel, in the hands of Collins and Charles Reade and others, had flourished in the preceding decade; when *Desperate Remedies* appeared in 1871 the genre was still alive but flagging. Among novels published in this year was *Not Woored, But Won* by James Payn, an imitator of Reade and Collins; Reade’s *A Terrible Temptation* appeared, a sensational, semi-autobiographical, social reform novel; Collins himself had moved on to propaganda fiction – *Poor Miss Finch* is about a blind girl who marries a man whose treatment for epilepsy has made him turn blue, still a sensational enough premise. But the year in which Hardy made his first appearance also included new work from three major novelists. George Meredith, whose advice had inspired the form of Hardy’s novel, himself produced a story with a plot, the romantic comedy *Harry Richmond*. Nearing the end of her career, George Eliot was publishing in 5s. parts her most ambitious work, *Middlemarch*. But Hardy’s comparative insignificance in this overlap of literary generations is sharply emphasised by his financial arrangements. While Hardy was having to pay £75 to have his novel published by Tinsley, Trollope’s *Ralph the Heir* appeared. Trollope received £2,500 for what he called ‘one of the worst novels I have written’.⁹ Although written in a popular genre, Hardy’s novel, which according to the conventions of the day was published anonymously, stood little chance of commercial success in comparison with such established names. Unsurprisingly it was