From Hardy to Faulkner

Wessex to Yoknapatawpha

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Preface

The novels of Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner may not immediately appear to have much in common, other than a formidable accumulation of critical scholarship devoted to their respective achievements. What then is the purpose of this study? Its genesis was, quite simply, an unpremeditated consideration of the reasons why I had long found each writer's fiction so deeply fascinating. Rather unexpectedly, a list of common features began to emerge; and the impulse behind this book was a sudden conviction that the two separate bodies of novels, augmented by short stories, demonstrated an unconscious yet strangely intimate and engrossing relationship with one another, which invited a comparative analysis. The parallel had seldom been drawn before, and never at length.

Two common factors in particular seemed significant. One was the creation of fictional microcosms of remote regions: within these, Hardy and Faulkner could examine dilemmas which were both local and universal. Dorset and Mississippi seem very distinct (though I have argued that in some ways they are not) but the artistic frameworks of Wessex and Yoknapatawpha can be perceived as allied or closely compatible countries. Working as they both did in traditional rural communities exposed to traumatic social change, the two writers seemed to have drawn upon comparable sources of inspiration, adopted analogous fictional strategies, and evolved similar responses to the problems of their protagonists. My second starting-point was the perception of a common attitude of ambivalence, permeating both the form and content of their fiction: an authorial ambivalence towards the rival claims of past and present, tradition and modernity, nature and society, which confront the inhabitants of these regional microcosms. A very modern sense of confusion assails these protagonists, firmly linking the two writers' work, and this study has taken shape from my attempts to identify examples and trace common patterns of this phenomenon. One such moment which seems especially significant to me, and to which I frequently refer throughout the book as a paradigm of Hardy and Faulkner's true common subject, occurs in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, when Angel is

first attracted to Tess:

> She was expressing in her own native phrases – assisted a little by her Sixth Standard training – feelings which might almost have been called those of the age – the ache of modernism. The perception arrested him less when he reflected that what are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition – a more accurate expression, by words in *-logy* and *-ism*, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries. (p. 163)

Hardy uses the phrase 'the ache of modernism' to connote a perception of social and cultural dislocation – a feeling that the world in which one lives is becoming increasingly unstable and unknowable, one both universal (as Angel realises) and yet peculiarly characteristic of traditional agricultural societies, such as Dorset and Mississippi, as they became increasingly influenced by modern, urban and commercial pressures. Ambivalent reactions to this sense of disorientation not only inspire much of Hardy and Faulkner's subject-matter, but also, crucially, influence the tone and structure of their narratives, as I attempt to show. This book was therefore written in the modest hope that the reader who enjoys Hardy's novels may experience an uncanny shock of recognition upon encountering Faulkner's work, or vice versa, and that a comparative interpretation may shed some useful light upon the nature of this affinity.

Their fiction is rooted in a precise sense of time and place, even before the concepts of Wessex and Yoknapatawpha were formulated. In my endeavour to show how and why their art seems to correspond, I therefore begin discussion of each man's work by examining his relationship with his regional environment, considering particular socio-historical contexts, and the writer's equivocal attitudes to social change. The emphasis of both men's interest in the historical process falls upon the prevalence of tragedy, and my third chapter explores some of their most sombre works. Possible antidotes to this tendency are discussed in the fourth chapter, through a consideration of the relationship between man and nature, and the role of more integrated, enduring protagonists, who again share some significant characteristics. The final chapter attempts to draw together the strands of my discourse by focussing upon a common feature stressed

throughout, namely the unity of form and content evinced by each writer's fictional work.

Any discussion of the novels of Hardy and Faulkner must lean heavily upon a wealth of previous literary scholarship. I hope that my obvious indebtedness to numerous critics is sufficiently acknowledged either in the text or the notes, but I should like to pay special tribute here to several books whose influence has been fundamental. Michael Millgate's *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (1966) and *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (1971) have proved an indispensable resource of critical insights; furthermore, both works pointed out the Hardy–Faulkner affinity long before I noticed it. Other invaluable sources include Michael Millgate's *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (1982), John Bayley's *An Essay on Hardy* (1978), Ian Gregor's *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (1974), Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), Merryn Williams's *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (1972), Douglas Brown's *Thomas Hardy* (1954), Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974), Cleanth Brooks's *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), Richard Gray's *The Literature of Memory* (1977), Robert Penn Warren's essay on Faulkner in his *Selected Essays* (1985), and David Minter's *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (1980). Other stimulating material was discovered in volumes of social and regional history; I can only hope that the literary relevance of my forays in this direction has been justified, and that in my efforts to synthesise ideas I have not prevented some original insights from emerging, nor obscured the clarity of previous scholars' researches, resulting as they have here in an unavoidably rich diet of quotations, notes and bibliography. I must also beg the reader's indulgence for making lavish quotations from the primary sources.

I am grateful to the Macmillan Press Ltd, for permission to quote extracts from Florence Emily Hardy's *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–1928*, and to Random House Inc., New York, and Curtis Brown Ltd, London, on behalf of Random House Inc., for permission to quote extracts from *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* by William Faulkner.

Finally, I am conscious of a deep personal debt to the many friends and colleagues who have helped me during this book's

lengthy gestation. I should particularly like to thank Martin Boston, Joanna Burt, Caroline Butler, Herbie Butterfield, Bob Casanta, Ted and Maggie Hopkin, Alan McLean, Keith Neville, Mary and Eddie Neville, David and Carol Piper, and Christina Wahle, for their generous encouragement at different times over a long period. I owe especial gratitude to Margaret Harris and Anne Constable, who produced the typescripts cheerfully and efficiently from labyrinthine manuscripts; to Richard Gray, a friend and teacher whose advice has always been unfailingly valuable; to my parents, for their support over many years; and to my colleagues and students at Exeter College.

J. R.

List of Abbreviations and Editions Cited

The following abbreviations are used in the text and notes. The publication details in parentheses refer to the actual editions cited.

WORKS BY HARDY

ACM	*'A Changed Man', 'The Waiting Supper', and Other Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1927)
CL	*The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. R. L. Purdy and M. Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–)
CP	*The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976)
TDL	*The Dorsetshire Labourer*, in *Longman's Magazine*, vol. 2 (July 1883), in *Thomas Hardy: Stories and Poems*, ed. D. J. Morrison (London: Dent, 1970)
	The Dynasts (London: Macmillan, 1921)
DR	*Desperate Remedies* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)
FFTMC	*Far from the Madding Crowd* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
AGOND	*A Group of Noble Dames* (London: Heron Books, 1970)
THOE	*The Hand of Ethelberta* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)
	An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress (London: Macmillan, 1976)
Jude	*Jude the Obscure* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
AL	*A Laodicean* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)

LLI	*Life's Little Ironies* (London: Macmillan, 1937)
Life	*The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–1928*, ed. Florence Emily Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1972); originally published as *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–91* (London: Macmillan, 1928) and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1930); these memoirs were written by Hardy, composed in the third person, and published after his death under his wife's name.
TMOC	*The Mayor of Casterbridge* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
	Old Mrs Chundle and Other Stories (London: Macmillan, 1977)
APOBE	*A Pair of Blue Eyes* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)
TROTN	*The Return of the Native* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
Tess	*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
	Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, ed. H. Orel (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 1966)
TTM	*The Trumpet-Major* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
TOAT	*Two on a Tower* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)
UTGT	*Under the Greenwood Tree* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
TWB	*The Well-Beloved* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975)
WT	*Wessex Tales* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)
TW	*The Woodlanders* (London: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1974)

WORKS BY FAULKNER

AA *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964)

AILD *As I Lay Dying* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1963)

Big Woods (New York: Random House, 1955)

DM *Doctor Martino, and Other Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934)

Early Prose and Poetry, ed. Carvel Collins (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1962)

Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters, ed. James B. Meriwether (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966); contains essay 'Mississippi', referred to in text by abbreviation *Miss.*

AF *A Fable* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1955)

The Faulkner–Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944–1962, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1966)

Faulkner at Nagano, ed. R. A. Jelliffe (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956)

Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957–1958, ed. F. L. Gwynn and J. L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press, 1959)

Faulkner at West Point, ed. J. L. Fant and R. Ashley (New York: Random House, 1964)

Flags in the Dust, ed. Douglas Day (New York: Random House, 1973)

GDM *Go Down, Moses* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1960)

TH *The Hamlet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957)

'An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*', in *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 26 (Summer 1973); and in *Southern Review*, vol. 8 (Autumn 1972)

IITD	*Intruder in the Dust* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1960)
KG	*Knight's Gambit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969)
LIA	*Light in August* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1960)
	Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968)
TM	*The Mansion* (London: Reprint Society, 1962)
	Mosquitoes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1955)
	New Orleans Sketches, ed. Carvel Collins (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1959)
	Pylon (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967)
TR	*The Reivers* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1970)
RFAN	*Requiem for a Nun* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1960)
	Sanctuary (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1953)
	Sartoris (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964)
SP	*Soldier's Pay* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1970)
TSATF	*The Sound and the Fury* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin 1964)
TT	*These Thirteen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974)
TTO	*The Town* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958)
UW	*Uncle Willy and Other Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967)
	The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner, ed. J. L. Blotner (New York: Random House, 1979)
TU	*The Unvanquished* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1955)
TWP	*The Wild Palms* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1961)

Contents

1

Dorset: 'the lost sense of home'

Down there I seem to be false to myself, my simple self that was,
And is not now, and I see him watching, wondering what crass cause
Can have merged him into such a strange continuator as this

(*Wessex Heights*, 1896)

I should like to begin this study by trying to establish some useful facts about social change in nineteenth-century rural England, in order to focus upon its relationship with the novels of Thomas Hardy. The intimacy of such a relationship, and the importance of Hardy's awareness of social change in his discovery of subject, may be gauged from the curious resurrection in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) of five passages from Hardy's essay of 1883, *The Dorsetshire Labourer*, published in *Longman's Magazine* as one of a series dealing with, in the editor's words, the condition of 'the peasantry of the various parts of the kingdom'.[1] For example, when the Durbeyfields of *Tess* are evicted from Marlott, Hardy explains

> it was the eve of Old Lady-Day, and the agricultural world was in a fever of mobility.... The labourers – or 'workfolk', as they used to call themselves immemorially till the other word was introduced from without – who wish to remain no longer in old places are removing to the new farms.
>
> These annual migrations from farm to farm were on the increase here....
>
> However, all the mutations so increasingly discernible in village life did not originate entirely in the agricultural unrest. A depopulation was also going on. The village had formerly contained, side by side with the agricultural labourers, an interesting and better-informed class, ranking distinctly above the former – the class to which Tess's father and mother had

> belonged – and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm-labourers; a set of people who owed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders like Tess's father, or copy-holders, or occasionally, small freeholders. But as the long holdings fell in they were seldom again let to similar tenants, and were mostly pulled down, if not absolutely required by the farmer for his hands. Cottagers who were not directly employed on the land were looked on with disfavour, and the banishment of some starved the trade of others, who were thus obliged to follow. These families, who had formed the backbone of village life in the past, who were the depositories of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as 'the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns' being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery. (*Tess*, pp. 400–1)

The universal flurry of activity on Old Lady-Day, the phrase 'a day of fulfilment', and the explanation of the term 'workfolk', are all drawn from *The Dorsetshire Labourer*; and the whole of the last, lengthy paragraph is an almost verbatim reproduction of the earlier essay's concluding remarks. For a moment the individualised, peculiarly cinematic images of *Tess* have frozen, and Hardy muses over a general and far-reaching social process. The complexity of the rural class structure and the poignancy and bitterness associated with the dispossession of an 'interesting and better-informed class' of life-holders, or 'liviers',[2] are obviously of considerable imaginative significance to Hardy, and it is clear, at the end of *The Dorsetshire Labourer*, that he feels for the ousted liviers – whom he has introduced quite gratuitously into his essay – an intimate loyalty and affection absent from his none the less sympathetic descriptions of the agricultural labourer. Both the partisan sensitivity of the essay, and the homeless Tess's wanderings throughout Wessex, are the products of Hardy's long brooding over a period of social upheaval. By deliberately incorporating *The Dorsetshire Labourer*'s earlier sociological images of dislocation and migration in two later novels, Hardy is acknowledging a source of his artistic inspiration. To understand this fact is to arrive immediately at one of the most simple and fundamental of Hardy's many affinities with Faulkner:

it was precisely the disorientating experience of social change in the present that eventually drove the writers of the Southern 'renaissance' to an investigation of their past. During the 1920s, the years when people like William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Thomas Wolfe were beginning to write and to examine their regional environment, the American South was at last acknowledging the death of its traditional way of life, based on the small farm and the great plantation, and recognising its absorption into the strange new world of industrialism and advanced capitalism.

Disturbance and disorientation are not necessarily bad things however, especially in the field of literature. In a sense, they make possible that analysis of personal motive, the examination of the premises on which our own beliefs and those of our society depend, which is surely one of the characteristic qualities of a good piece of writing.[3]

So it was too with Thomas Hardy. He and William Faulkner may at first appear to have little in common: one born in Dorset in 1840, the other born in Mississippi, dying as recently as 1962. Yet each is the chronicler of a transitional era, and a society in the throes of transformation. Each came from a poor, primitive and isolated rural community, and experienced a period of intense upheaval as his region painfully adapted its traditional way of life to the demands of an industrialised, urbanised, commercialised twentieth century. Both Hardy and Faulkner witnessed the decline of the social class from which they had come, and their novels are therefore concerned with the loss of traditional values and culture, the disintegration of their childhood worlds.

Furthermore, the two writers are themselves examples of what might be desribed as the *transitional consciousness*, a sensibility full of what Hardy called 'the ache of modernism' (*Tess*, p. 163). Each grew up in a traditional rural environment, yet each became estranged from his roots by a common experience of education and formative periods spent in modern cities. Hardy and Faulkner therefore share a profoundly equivocal mood, permeating both the form and content of their novels: they are able to see both the positive and negative aspects of each way of life, tradition and modernity. Fascinated by the process of history and by a certain quality of

meditative nostalgia common to their respective regions, they combine a critique of the darker aspects of that past with an interest in the process of change and the transforming social attitudes – to class, sex, marriage or race – which it brings. The chronicles of Wessex and Yoknapatawpha County consequently express a brooding ambivalence, towards man, nature and 'society' – even towards the role of a man of letters – which invites comparative analysis as a powerful literary response to the phenomenon of an engulfing, mechanised and standardised modern way of life.

My aim in this chapter is therefore to investigate the social structure of the changing rural world which Hardy portrays and to attempt to identify the genesis of his subject, before going on to consider the novelistic methods by which Hardy's work brings Angel and Tess's 'ache of modernism' to life.

It is importantly firstly to emphasise the heterogeneity of early Victorian rural society, for its features are frequently oversimplified. Too often traditional 'Wessex', like Faulkner's 'Old South', is obscured by a veil of romantic myth, concealing a more untidy historical reality. Such myths, whether of bucolic English 'peasants' or gallant Southern 'aristocrats', are cherished by a largely urban public today, as yesterday, because they seem to offer an easy nostalgic anodyne, a clear and comforting distinction between a simple, innocent rustic past, and a complex, problematic urban present. But *Far from the Madding Crowd* is an ironic title; if Weatherbury is remote, it contains the same turbulent passions, tragedies and injustices as the city. An obvious point, perhaps, yet treacherous misreadings of Hardy's scrupulous nuances still abound, ironically in view of Hardy's warnings about blithely ignorant generalisations of country life, such as stereotyping of the labouring yokel, that 'pitiable dummy known as Hodge'[4] (another passage from *The Dorsetshire Labourer* to be revived in *Tess*).

A small but significant example of this danger is provided by one otherwise perspicacious critic's claim that, 'It was not until Hardy wrote *Tess* that an educated author was able to identify, unreservedly, with an uneducated village girl.'[5] Of course, Hardy's sympathy for Tess *is* strikingly new and bold in its Victorian context. But the relationship between author and character is not simply one of contrast between two polarised social worlds. Tess's aptitude for her newly authorised education is in fact particularly emphasised in the novel, as is the resulting sense of cultural

dislocation (a phenomenon of which Hardy himself was acutely conscious):

> Mrs. Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages: the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality....
>
> Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (*Tess*, pp. 48, 50–1)

Far from being 'uneducated', Tess is later to tell Angel that

> I was in the Sixth Standard when I left school, and they said I had great aptness, and should make a good teacher, so it was settled that I should be one. But there was trouble in my family.
>
> (p. 229)

To comment upon Tess's schooling is not merely to cavil over a careless word, for it is precisely because Tess is *not* an ordinary 'uneducated village girl', but an unusually intelligent, sensitive and reflective creature with a 'touch of rarity about her', that her fateful relationship with Angel is set in motion. Tess does not succeed in becoming a teacher (a common source of mobility for ambitious young Victorians from humble backgrounds, such as Fancy Day, Sue Bridehead, Hardy's lover Tryphena Sparks, and his sisters Mary and Kate), but her ability to express in 'her own native phrases – assisted a little by her Sixth Standard training – feelings which might almost have been called those of the age – the ache of modernism' (p. 163), awakens Angel's interest in her transitional consciousness. Had he followed the conventions of his class, and had Tess been an unremarkable village girl such as Betty Priddle, no marriage could have occurred. But their era is one where the traditional boundaries are crumbling, and class definitions become blurred. Simon Stoke, the Northern money-lender, reappears as a Stoke d'Urberville,