The First 100 Years of Hardy Criticism: 1871–1971

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Part One: 1871–97

During this early period Hardy’s reviewers acknowledged that despite his dubious morality, implausibly philosophical ‘peasants’, clumsy use of coincidence and forced diction, he was a decidedly uncommon novelist. One of the very first reviewers of Desperate Remedies begins with its faults – that it contains no original characters, ‘no display except of the brute kind, no pictures of Christian virtue’ and no ‘transcendent talent’. Then the tone shifts: this anonymous author shows a talent for ‘catching and fixing phases of peasant life’ and a ‘sensitiveness to scenic and atmospheric effects’; his powers ‘ought to be extended, instead of being prostituted to the purpose of idle prying into the ways of wickedness’.1

However, another reviewer disagrees: A Pair of Blue Eyes (PBE), for example, reveals ‘quick observation and sparkling humour and true moral instinct’ as well as ‘a delicate and subtle analysis of varieties of characters and moods of feeling, a poet’s sympathy with human passion when tuned to its sweetest or saddest notes, and an artist’s eye for every aspect of nature’; characters are ‘revealed rather than told’ and Elfride exhibits a ‘subtle union of the extremest purity of conduct and intention, with a timidity which, in her loving and ardent nature, suggests prevarication and duplicity’. The reviewer asks to ‘hear of Hardy soon, but not too soon again’.2

Ambivalence also occurs in Andrew Lang’s review of Far From the Madding Crowd (FFMC): Hardy is trying to extract philosophy from a ‘crossroad-of-time setting where the old and new meet’; of an ideal setting he has created a less than ideal novel, and while he shows ‘an original and admirable treatment of nature’ the principals are not fully successful because they lack fullness of design.3 Reviewers of The Return of the Native (RN) were more sharply polarized. The Spectator lauds Hardy for a ‘story of singular power and interest, and in the highest degree vivid’ but his characters are composites rather than ‘true pictures of rustic life’ and he has lowered the level of the ‘significance of human destiny’ to mere dreariness by ‘making human passion in general common-place and poor’; worse, he puts his own thoughts, in literary diction, into the mouths of his ‘peasants’, who become puppets of fate, thus making tragedy in the Aristotelian sense impossible. On the one hand, Hardy conveys

a mood in which there seems to be no room for freedom, no great heights, no great depths in human life, only the ups and downs of a dark necessity, in which men play the parts of mere offspring of the physical universe, and are governed by forces and tides no less inscrutable

and, on the other, his descriptions reveal ‘not only a striking novelist, but in essence at least, a fine poet’.4 By contrast, The Atlantic Monthly praises RN for possessing a ‘more philosophical range’ than other contemporary novels; Egdon is populated by rustics ‘worthy of Shakespeare’s touch’, the ‘higher characters’ ‘are all touched with some hue of their wild surroundings’ and Clym Yeobright is ‘a typical spirit of today’, ‘a tragic figure’, a ‘modern reformer … shown … [in a] fresh and unhackneyed light’.5

In later reviews ambivalence gives place to a sharper polarization of opinion: was Hardy to be reckoned a great writer or not? Some reviewers note a marked shift of emphasis, singling out as major turning points The Mayor of Casterbridge (MC), The Woodlanders (W) and, of course, Tess. In RN, they said, Hardy seemed to write less spontaneously – illustrating a thesis rather than telling a good story. One reviewer did see it as a turning point but remained ambivalent: it ‘presents a new phase, and perhaps a new departure in the development of Mr. Hardy’s genius’ but although it is ‘a more serious work’ than its predecessors it is not a stronger one; it is ‘less spontaneous’ and ‘suggests a more definite [authorial] intention’; the death of Mrs Yeobright is ‘morally stained’ and near the end of Eustacia’s life ‘a definite moral sense is introduced into her nature [transposing it] from its original key’; Hardy ‘has not had all the courage of his imagination … having conceived her [Eustacia] for a larger scale, he has modified her to suit a small[er] one’. Thus,
for this reviewer, ‘imagination and intellect are fighting for mastery in Mr. Hardy’s work’; there is a danger that ‘the consciousness of the motive [will] paralyse the inspiration’ in his future novels. However, ‘paralysis of inspiration’ was not to prove problematic, even if affronting his readers’ moral sense would be to the very end of his days.

MC, though, proved problematic for different reasons: there was its dark vision of mankind, and Henchard (says one of Hardy’s most influential reviewers, R. H. Hutton) was not a ‘man of character’ as Hardy claims but ‘a man of large nature and depth of passion, who is yet subject to the most fitful influences’ – he lacks ‘fixity of mind, he ran mostly to waste’. Although Hutton chides Hardy for using a ‘fashionable pessimism’ inappropriate to his ‘homely scenery and characters’ and for using ‘character to mould circumstance’ rather than ‘circumstance to chasten and purify character’, he admits that Hardy ‘has not given us a more powerful study than that of Michael Henchard’, whose ‘stalwart and wayward nature has been [admirably] delineated’. H. M. Alden agrees that Hardy ‘has never achieved anything more skilful or valuable in its way than the recognition and development’ of Henchard’s troubles; his ‘first sense of people is apparently not a literary sense, but something very much more natural’; MC is ‘not inferior to any other story … in its grasp of character’ – nevertheless, is it the work of a great novelist in mid-career?

The Athenaeum thought not. While Hardy is a keen observer of the human situation as well as a gifted storyteller and plot constructor, he still insists on using his ‘far-fetched and unpleasant similes and epithets’ and continues to make his ‘peasants’ sound like Greek philosophers; equally The Woodlanders gives ‘a picture of shameless falsehood, levity, and infidelity, followed by no true repentance, and yet crowned at the end with perfect success’; it is ‘written with an indifference to the moral effect it conveys’; Hardy is ‘as usual stronger in his pictures of genuine rural life than in any other part of his story’ and the ‘best study in the book is that of the vacillating and restless old timber merchant, Melbury’.

As both Tess and especially Jude seemed to show, Hardy’s vision of humanity grew darker as he matured. Mowbray Morris, like many others, objected to Tess’s subtitle, ‘A Pure Woman’, then turned to the dark nature of the tale:

Mr. Hardy has told an extremely disagreeable story in an extremely disagreeable manner, which is not rendered less so by his affectation of expounding a great
moral law, or by the ridiculous character of some of the scenes into which this affectation plunges the reader.

Hardy’s early humour has departed, he attempts too much moralizing, he has misread or forgotten the Greek and Elizabethan dramas ‘if he conceives that there is any analogy between their great handling of tragic motives and this clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust’.11

Among more balanced critiques of Tess, and sensitive to the fatalism of the ‘peasants’ and the grimness of the tale, The Times judged it Hardy’s greatest novel, daring in its treatment of conventional ideas, a novel both sad and tragic: happiness is ‘missed by a hair’s-breadth’.12 A New York reviewer, however, laments Hardy’s debt to ‘French’ realism in Tess: he has sacrificed ‘the higher truth of imagination for a … lower kind of fidelity to the ignoble facts of life’; despite that, the novel ‘is truly a great work’ and gives the impression ‘of a creative personality in some ways greater than the thing created’.13

Jude was more difficult for Victorians: one typical reviewer suggests that if it is profitable to study the bad books of great writers one should study Jude.14 For Harry Thurston Peck, Jude is ‘both a moral monstrosity and an outrage upon art’; it is a ‘studied satyriasis of approaching senility, suggesting the morbidly curious imaginings of a masochist or some other form of sexual pervert’.15 As early as 1896, however, Edmund Gosse traces two intertwining threads of action in the novel: the ideal life Jude wished for versus the real life he was fated to lead and, second, the geometrical design of the relations between the four principals; the plot, Gosse agrees, is ghastly, but a novelist of Hardy’s distinction must treat what themes he will; the vita sexualis of Sue is the central interest of the book, her portrait is admirable, a ‘poor, maimed degenerate’ ignorant of herself and of the perversion of her instincts, full of febrile illusions, ready to dramatize her empty life and play at loving, though she cannot love; it is a terrible study in pathology, but of the splendid success of the portrayal there could not be two opinions.16

The American man of letters, novelist and editor of The Atlantic Monthly William Dean Howells was an outspoken Hardy enthusiast:

I love even the faults of Hardy, I will let him play me any trick he chooses.
His people live very close to the heart of nature, and no one, unless it is

12 G-D I, 55, item #183, citing ‘Mr. Hardy’s New Novel’. The Times (13 Jan. 1892), 13.
13 G-D I, 55, item #184, citing ‘Mr. Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles’. Review of Reviews, 5 (Feb. 1892), 200.
Tourguenief, gives you a richer and sweeter sense of her unity with human nature.  

Hardy returns to the Greek mode of tragedy, linking the present with the pre-Christian world where there is no Providence, only Fate; the character of Jude is always dignified, and even such a fool as Sue is pitiable; Jude may be morbid, but however unpleasant the events, they are true to the human condition; while it challenges certain beliefs and customs, such questioning is healthy.  

With the exception of noteworthy studies by Lionel Johnson and Annie Macdonell, few full-length books on Hardy were published before 1900. Johnson praises Hardy’s richness of detail, concern with modern subtleties of emotion and thought, economy of expression, accuracy of description and his one great theme, ‘Wessex, and its people’ with its concern for the past and present. Immersed in this atmosphere are heroes capable of a wise passiveness, rustics who are both naturally ignorant and shrewdly humorous (Shakespearean and fatalistic, they are barely affected by city life), and a variety of characters who are natural growths of the soil – despite a certain mental immobility they display their fatalistic ideas; ‘racily and richly’ they are clearly in harmony with their surroundings, whereas the principals are ‘at variance with the fundamental principles and crowning issues’ of their lives. Hardy never courts popular tastes, is always ardently sincere – albeit that faults, in the novels, such as the ‘apparent denial of anything like conscience in men’ render his ‘impressive argument [in Tess] … sterile’: his determinism, in several novels, strikes the reader as ‘haunting and disenchancing’.  

Macdonell, in turn, stresses the structural integrity of the novels, the mature fiction moving towards the structural unity of the five-act form of tragic drama; both pictorial quality and form serve as ‘illustration and commentary’ supporting basically poetic ideas, notably in Hardy’s characterizations which are never completely, exclusively realistic but possess enough of the abstract or unusual to make them more than transcripts of life. Remaining aloof from the fashionable moralistic tendency in the novel, Hardy doesn’t argue; he simply creates; his most persistent theme is perhaps the destructive nature of passion which is not wrong, but tragic, for it is forever ‘unsatisfied’.  

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17 G-D I, 68, item #243, citing William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions. New York, 1895, 182 – published the same year as Jude.  
20 G-D I, 64, item #223, citing Annie Macdonell, Thomas Hardy. London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1894.
Part Two: 1898–1928

Hardy’s achievements as a novelist seem to have complicated contemporary assessments of his poems and of The Dynasts – could he be regarded a true poet? ‘F. Y. E’, for example, calls Wessex Poems (WP) and Poems of the Past and the Present (PPP) ‘in great part, translated prose’; Hardy does ‘violence to his ideas in adjusting them to a form chosen quite independently of them’; he ‘is poetical; that is to say, he is not quite a poet’.21 Similarly, a reviewer of PPP observes that ‘poetry is not his proper medium. He does not move easily in it’; his verse has ‘a haunting rhythm and a wild, eerie, melancholy timbre and ring all of his own’ but he is ‘barely a poet’.22

Other critics were impressed by the personality of Hardy’s verse, the ‘tang’ which made it unique. Typical of many, Johnson glimpsed the uncompromising toughness, the hard clarity of Hardy’s vision in WP – the passion, humour, wistfulness, grimness, tenderness, ‘but never joy, the radiant and invincible’. ‘The Impercipient’, though, softens and sweetens the volume of fifty poems, and while Browning himself might be proud of ‘The Burghers’ and ‘My Cicely’, Hardy ‘drives at practice’ (like Marcus Aurelius) and never dallies over a wayside charm.23 In like manner Macdonell notices that Hardy’s ‘uncompromising grip of hard fact’ and ‘wistful tenderness for life in the grip of fact’s tyranny’ is omnipresent in the poetry. Perceptively she intuits that Hardy’s ‘intensity of expression’ necessitated his conversion from prose to verse.24

Critics found much to complain about – Hardy’s odd coinages, resurrection of dead words, ‘unmusical’ ear and the sombreness of his vision – but few cared to bite with the fatal intent of an anonymous reviewer who calls WP ‘a curious and slipshod volume’ full of ‘slovenly … uncouth verses, stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived and worse wrought’, the bulk of which Hardy should have burnt. But there are nuggets: ‘Neutral Tones’ and ‘Heiress and Architect’ indicate Hardy’s mature strength, and ‘I look into my Glass’ is a veritable poem that will outlive the rest of the book.25

Like Hardy’s early volumes of poems, The Dynasts was often taken as the work of a displaced novelist; the Spectator sees it is a drama of epic proportions, for the study not the stage; it shows ‘events which shook the world as a kind of puppet show behind which moves the … Immanent Will’, ruthless and incomprehensible, ‘a thousandfold more distant from humanity than the Fate of other poets’; ‘peasant’

characters are ‘as real as life itself’ but great men are only ‘brooding shadows’; spirits never speak ‘without expressing a banal thought in the worst verse’; it is ‘The work of a poet’ but it is ‘rarely poetry’. The TLS queries why Hardy, a master of prose narrative and poetry, here chooses a dramatic form which is readable only when it has human qualities (the four rustics); the other seventy-odd characters have no personality nor do they suffer or develop; most damning to dramatic effect are the Phantom Intelligences who prevent us from sympathizing with characters whose lives are meaningless.

The Dynasts, like Hardy’s shorter poems, came in time to be judged on its own merits. Max Beerbohm was among the first to see its uniqueness: the ‘first modern work of dramatic fiction in which free will is denied to the characters’; men are mere ‘electrons’ although the inclusion of great historical figures in this pattern makes it ‘a noble achievement’; Hardy had to ‘wrestle for his effects’ because his poetry reveals itself ‘more surely and firmly through the medium of prose than through the medium of rhyme and meter’.

After Volume III of The Dynasts appeared, critics returned, with a far better understanding of Hardy’s considerable poetic powers, to assessing his shorter poems. Time’s Laughingstocks (TL) is a pleasant surprise; Hardy proves himself ‘a master of the ballad’; his subjects are grimly pessimistic but it is ‘wonderful poetry’; he uses verse ‘like a master’. In similar vein, M. Hewlett observes that the rhythm and tone of TL catch the essence of Wessex; the poems, whose ultimate ancestor is the broadside ballad, show a Greek simplicity, freedom from useless ornament, and a philosophy of fatalism and acceptance. Yet an old complaint surfaces again. For the Athenaeum, poetry aims at expressing the beauty of nature in terms of ‘human life and human ideals’, yet a poet of Hardy’s calibre reveals ‘that an abiding beauty is not what is mainly to be found there, and that ideals are so seldom realized that it is hypocrisy to be serious about them’; he merits praise, however, for his fidelity to his point of view; his ‘language is appropriate’ (considering his disillusionment) and ‘the temper he writes in is exactly that which could alone give credibility, artistic justice, and a natural appeal to the point of view he is expressing’.

When Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries (SC) was published in 1914 England was at war (which may explain the slant the reviews reveal), and such terms as ‘ironic’, ‘satire’, ‘gloom’, ‘bitter’ and ‘tragic’ prevail but, surprisingly, there is no insightful discussion of the ‘Poems of 1912–1913’. Hardy’s growing mastery of poetic form is praised – the TLS likens him to Meredith in his reaction against

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27 G-D I, 108, item #448, citing ‘Mr. Thomas Hardy’s Drama’. TLS (15 Jan. 1904), 11–12.
'over-poetical poetry'; 'his verse, even when it seems crabbed or morose or tantalizing, is still thoroughly poetic in form'; though despondent it has 'unexpected beauty'; even in his bitterest disappointment Hardy seems to have faith, even though it may be in vain. The Academy also balances positive and negative qualities: Hardy continues 'his preoccupation with the gloomy and sordid' (my italics); this, however, does not detract from his qualities as a poet: 'Mr. Hardy is concerned with the vivid presentation of moods', the success of which is due to his extraordinary concentration; 'our own relief comes from the imagining of a certain unholy joy in the poet as he fashions some very bitter and deadly stanzas, smiling genially – so we may be permitted to think – at the shudder of his readers'. Another reviewer (also apparently untouched by the 'Poems of 1912–1913') acknowledges the 'autumnal and elegiac' tone of SC which displays the 'sickness rather than the soundness of life'; although Hardy's 'technique is often halting and clumsy and his style is lacking in distinction' he does say 'what he means with a force and concentration unattainable in prose'; he is 'not a singer, or a consoler, or a prophet; he stands with his back to the future, immersed in tragic retrospect'. Hardy's steadily growing renown in the twentieth century was largely due,ironically, to the spread of interest in his novels. John Cunliffe, noting a general neglect of the poems and perceiving that what 'moves the poet to a kind of cheerfulness … [is a] triumphant indulgence in sexual desire', feels the preference for the novels is justified, citing RN and MC as major achievements and Tess as Hardy's greatest novel: 'the author’s passionate indignation at injustice, human and divine' produces 'a notable work of art, springing from deep feeling, nobly planned, and, on the whole, masterfully executed'. Some notable critical works appear in the last decade of Hardy's life: Joseph Warren Beach, dividing the novels into successes and failures, determines the former largely by adherence to a dramatic ideal; after a string of failed novels Hardy showed partial recovery in MC and W and since Tess is a character of beauty and strength of personality, the pathos of her intense suffering ultimately makes Tess Hardy's greatest achievement. Jude is nearly as great but hasn't the beauty or the heroic character of Tess; it is, though, outstanding in its 'pitiless search for the truth', its avoidance of melodrama and its adherence to what is true of human nature. Mary Ellen Chase documents Hardy's careful bowdlerization of MC, Tess and Jude for serial publication, while Virginia Woolf describes him as an 'unconscious

32 G-D I, 159, item #669, citing ‘Mr. Hardy’s New Poems’. TLS (19 Nov. 1914), 514.
33 G-D I, 159, item #670, citing ‘Mr. Thomas Hardy’s Unholy Joy’. Academy, 87 (28 Nov. 1914), 476–7.
36 G-D I, 200, item #858, citing Joseph Warren Beach, The Technique of Thomas Hardy. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1922.
37 G-D I, 266, item #1141, citing Mary Ellen Chase, Thomas Hardy: from Serial to Novel. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1927.
writer’ whose ‘moments of vision’ create ‘passages of astonishing beauty and force’ in every book he writes; three or four characters dominate each novel and ‘attract the force of the elements’; while Hardy’s women suffer through dependence on others men suffer through ‘conflict with fate’; love is a ‘catastrophe’ happening ‘suddenly and overwhelmingly’; Jude is the only novel which could fairly condemn Hardy as a pessimist.38

Among longer studies Lascelles Abercrombie deals with Hardy’s entire corpus but focuses mainly on the novels: in FFMC, RN and MC the characters possess the vigour of the earth, demonstrating that Wessex life is capable of tragic possibilities; Tess and Jude are novels of ‘epic form’ which allow Hardy to weave in his own opinions; they are major achievements. Hardy’s philosophical and psychological poems are of lasting value39 but The Dynasts is a great summation of the novels and a ‘characteristic poem of our age’ of the very highest order.

Ernest Brennecke, Jr. would have agreed: The Life of Thomas Hardy was among the first serious philosophical studies of Hardy’s art, pointing out that both Hardy and Schopenhauer subscribe to fatalism, to a view of the universe as ‘an immense automatic clockwork’ in which everything is done without purpose, governed by the Immanent Will, a force which controls reason while remaining unconscious. The Dynasts and Wessex novels confirm this: although man possesses consciousness, his life is governed by an unconscious, indifferent Will. Hardy, like Schopenhauer, who contends that life ‘is essentially suffering’, is called a pessimist, but this does not exclude an occasional ‘decided gleam of hope’ in his work.40

Regarding fictional technique Samuel C. Chew classes Hardy as a late Victorian: stylistically, he is ‘willing to sacrifice elegance and grace to precision’, but the tenor of his fiction is anything but Victorian: he advocates divorce yet is realistic about love as ‘physical passion, a sexual attraction, carrying with it some hope of a permanent bond of affection based on common interests and common ideas’; Hardy is generally bitter towards women, who are portrayed as fickle, passionate, never sweet and lacking self-control, whereas men are either sensualists or rigid intellectualists, an ‘honest middle group … who subordinate desire to the other demands of life’.41

On the Continent, interest centred on acclaiming Hardy’s skill as novelist: German critic Anna Brunnemann, in 1904, praises him for asserting his individuality in Tess and Jude, citing him as one of the few contemporary English writers to treat moral and social problems in a bold and individual manner.42 French critic Henry Davray

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observes that while Hardy’s books may still be less popular than Marie Corelli’s or Hall Caine’s, they will long outlive the latter. Davray was perhaps the first French reviewer of The Dynasts: at first reading he was tempted to ‘mock and condemn’ but desisted because of the work’s incomplete state; two years later ‘Each … evocative sentence sweeps the spirit to dizzying heights whereas he contemplates a fantastic spectacle, unbelievable yet at the same time ‘real’, French and German book-length studies of Hardy in this period are mostly dissertations. First is Richard Taufkirch with Die Romankunst von Thomas Hardy (Hardy’s Art of the Novel), who claims that critics have done Hardy an injustice by expressing their own biases while neglecting the ‘artistic laws of the novels’; Hardy is no pessimist although he is fully aware of the dark side of human existence.

Pierre d’Exideuil’s Le Couple humain dans l’œuvre de Thomas Hardy (The Human Couple in the Works of Thomas Hardy) is sensitive and insightful. Hardy’s pessimism – its roots in German philosophy (chiefly Schopenhauer) and post-Darwinism – provides an important critical base for d’Exideuil’s study of Hardy’s exploration of love relationships in the novels.

Part Three: 1929–39

Hardy’s attempts to safeguard his privacy by writing his autobiography pseudonymously (under Florence Hardy’s name) did not necessarily lead to positive evaluations of his novels: whereas Ford Madox Ford slurs Hardy for swelling insignificant ‘novels of commerce’, T.S. Eliot claims that his style ‘touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good’. And for John Ingram Bryan, Hardy remains content ‘with a company of limited moral and intellectual beings through whose imaginary experiences he attempted an estimate of reality’; none of his characters is great or noble; his heroines are sensual and

46 G-D I, 150–51, item #630, citing Richard Taufkirch, Die Romankunst von Thomas Hardy. Frankfurt/Main, Knauer, 1912.
stupid; his verse, reflecting the same pessimistic philosophy of the novels, ‘is not real poetry, because it has no joyous or singing quality, nor the buoyancy of true life ... To the Hardy school of fiction and poetry there is but one goal: distrust of the integrity of the universe.’

Chief among early defenders of Hardy’s fiction is D. H. Lawrence – perhaps the first to recognize the fierce dichotomies between the simple instinctual life and the complex intellectualism of Hardy’s characters; opposed to the ‘vast morality of life itself’, Eustacia, for example, seeks self-realization, Clym would escape from it; like Tolstoy’s characters, they are punished by society’s hierarchical, mechanical system rather than by Fate as in Shakespeare or Sophocles; the real stuff of tragedy is Egdon Heath, the instinctive life, the ‘deep black source’; Eustacia, Tess, Sue and Jude do not abide by the ‘vast morality’ but take what they want and thus tragedy ensues. Man is made for freedom, not for work which is the activity of society’s machine – safe, predictable, imprisoning.

In the main, Hardy’s poetry fared better than his novels during this posthumous period. Although studies of the plenitude of his poetic diversity did not appear until after 1940, F. R. Leavis did notice that his greatness lay in the integrity with which he accepted the conclusion (enforced, he believed, by science) that nature is indifferent to human values, in the completeness of his recognition and in the purity and adequacy of his response: Hardy is a naive poet of ‘pre-critical innocence’ whose great poems are a ‘triumph of character’, that is, of powerful personal urgings that transformed his ‘innocent awkwardness’; among his best are ‘After a Journey’, ‘The Voice’, ‘The Self-Unseeing’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, ‘Neutral Tones’ and ‘During Wind and Rain’. In turn, Arthur McDowall argues that Hardy was ‘greater as a poet than as anything else, yet not exclusively [in] his verse’; in The Dynasts his unswerving devotion to truth is mixed with an intimacy that also informs ‘the superb “Poems of 1912–13,” which it seems almost rude to overhear’; simultaneously, the novels display the poetic cast of his mind, showing the full range of his temperament and keen attention to both the detail and the larger patterns of life.

Part Four: 1940–71

The Southern Review devoted the whole of its Summer 1940 issue to Hardy. Fourteen provocative essays, by such notables as W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, R. P. Blackmur, Bonamy Dobree, F. R. Leavis, Katherine Anne Porter and John Crowe Ransom, did much to revivify interest in Hardy. Porter rebutted Eliot by arguing that Hardy edifies by raising serious questions; his characters moreover ‘suffer the tragedy of being, Eliot’s by not being’ (my italics); in style, Hardy is not consciously concerned with the phrase, sentence, paragraph, but with overall effect; this makes his work always memorable, occasionally sublime. Barzun shows (in defiance of many critics) that unity does exist in Hardy; old Aristotelian categories of fact and fiction (Truth and Poetry) simply do not apply; his brand of truth is not narrowly realistic but romantic or imaginative; while his events sometimes seem unreal, his people are true; we object to the events because, although causeless, they effect tragedy; he treats truth poetically (‘Truth and Poetry do not fight a Manichean fight which will leave Science or Ignorance master of the field: they merge into each other by degrees and constitute together the sum total of mind-measured reality’).

Two major gaps in Hardy studies, a magisterial biography and a major secondary bibliography (un-annotated) were filled in 1940 and 1942 by Carl J. Weber, who published extensively on Hardy – well over a dozen works in two decades. In 1954 Evelyn Hardy followed suit, tracing the predominant note of sadness in Hardy’s works to his childhood studies and experiences.

In 1965 Philip Larkin posted a striking notice: ‘Wanted: Good Hardy Critic’. Hardy’s reputation has not taken the accustomed posthumous dip … the principal post-Eliot poets (Auden, Betjeman, Dylan Thomas) have acknowledged his power [yet he seems to be held in] comparatively low esteem … by critics in this century. [Aside from the] British Academy reservation … the century’s principal critics have really shown little interest in him. Eliot was hostile, Leavis patronizing, Wilson, Empson, Blackmur, Trilling – none has been other than neglectful.

What is missing, Larkin believes (echoing Evelyn Hardy’s notion of ‘sadness’) is ‘extended consideration of the centrality of suffering in Hardy’s work’.60

Hardy critics of this last decade, with their focus on such themes as tragedy, pessimism and fatalism, indicate that Larkin’s call did not fall on deaf ears. In an earlier study Douglas Brown had argued that in the five great novels – FFMC, RN, W, MC and Tess – Hardy presented ‘a clash between agricultural and urban modes of life’ and traced a drastic decline in the former and the defeat of ‘the peasantry’; additionally, Hardy’s verse is ‘the harvest of the novels’: in deceptively simple poems (which ‘extend themselves in the mind’) Hardy’s deepest theme, ‘the desolation of utter loss’, reveals not only his ‘poetic personality’ but the endowments of ballad, folk-singer, nostalgia, severe honesty and an ability to render poignantly the ‘presentness’ of the moment.61

The weakest section of an otherwise balanced and insightful study by Richard C. Carpenter is on the poems, where he falls into the ‘Leavis Fallacy’: Hardy wrote only a handful of good poems. By contrast, Hardy-the-novelist may be reticent in handling sexuality, public pressure enforcing this while stimulating his skill in creating scenes of great connotative power, notably the sexually-suggestive sword-display scene in FFMC; his familiarity with folk custom and classical tradition coupled with his philosophic inquisitiveness accelerated his tendency to view experience mythically; his fiction ‘is abundant in powerful archetypal situations and symbols’ – important aspects of his art.62

The Wessex novels continued to arouse more critical acclaim and popular interest than did Hardy’s poetry. David Cecil stresses contradictory tendencies in the fiction – the gloomy view of the world, a conception of the universe as ‘a huge impersonal machine’, a view of man as helpless in the face of circumstances, struggling against Fate in the form of love and chance – yet Hardy was intellectually advanced, which does not prepare us for the aesthetic aspect. He was ‘a man of the past’ and like Walter Scott, he liked a story to be a story, always displaying an individual imagination made powerful by being true to nature, by being poetic, and by dealing with the strange and grotesque.63 Albert Guérard’s seminal study has some points of agreement with Cecil: Hardy is not primarily a craftsman but a traditional teller of tales, a great poet who practised fiction waywardly; he needs revaluation because most of his critics belong to a generation holding different standards for the novel – abjuring the grotesque, macabre and demonic elements. The twentieth-century novel emphasizes sensation, a vision of the world; readers are now attracted by qualities that disturbed older critics. Hardy frequently wavered from his initial

impulse after it had been exhausted, shifting between realism and anti-realism: the indifferently rational realist always threatens to suppress the haunted poet.64

A revival of interest in Hardy’s poetry and drama at this time is marked by several new studies. James G. Southworth, seeing a tension between the poet’s philosophical-scientific leanings and his emotional life, locates Hardy’s roots and sympathies not with the Victorian poets but ‘with the scientists: Darwin, Huxley, Mill, and others who began in the 1850s to upset so-called Victorian complacency’; his aesthetic is governed by ‘the purity of his reaction to form as an object of emotion rather than as a means of suggesting emotion or conveying information’.65 Next, Samuel Hynes identifies a dominant pattern in the poems, ‘the eternal conflict between irreconcilables’; Hardy’s method is antinomial rather than dialectical because there is no resolution; similarly, his metaphors are based on two worlds – of light, youth and life, and of age and death: the latter is dominant, the other forms a countermelody. Hardy’s revisions do not alter the form or meaning of his poems but clarify them and refine the antinomial qualities: in The Dynasts Napoleon is modern man, isolated from fellow men and helpless to change his fate; there are two worlds – human and spirit – to create an antinomy: the final speech by the Pities at the end is not a resolution but only another point of view. The Dynasts proves that Hardy’s antinomial pattern works on a large scale.66

Next, Kenneth Marsden points to Hardy’s reputation as a poet, which was anomalous, first because of the peculiar critical pressures and assumptions which beset his early years as a poet and second because of the eccentricity and unevenness of the verse itself; these difficulties have impeded an honest appreciation of his accomplishments; his habits of composition explain in large measure his unevenness: like Wordsworth, he worked from recollected experiences, his poems evincing a conspicuous fidelity to those inspirational experiences; ironically the ‘intensely personal’ quality of the poems benefits from Hardy’s frequent claims to be writing personative or dramatic verses; these disclaimers alleviate responsibility for the views expressed in them. Hardy, says Marsden, passed from relatively conventional early verse to an intensely personal and philosophic idiom in the early 1900s, then to a more detached, more descriptive mode; his revisions to WP seem to be directed primarily at sharpening clarity and reducing the eccentricity of the language.67

The Dynasts received three important reconsiderations within a decade. J. O. Bailey argues that the drama evinces the influence of Ernst Haeckl’s

determinism and Eduard Von Hartmann’s theory of the Unconscious; it is not as pessimistic as the 1890s fiction – to wit the ‘paean of hope’ that stems naturally from a theme that ‘evolutionary meliorism is possible, that the consciousness may be striving to express itself’. This view may be taken as Hardy’s, just as the General Chorus speaks for him; the Spirit of the Years mirrors his thought, the Spirit of the Pities, his feelings and temperament while collectively the Spirits develop the theme of *Dynasts* through a clash of opinions – the Pities presenting Hardy’s view that, informed by human consciousness, the Immanent Will may awaken. Most characters do not serve the Will but are subject to it: Napoleon is ‘a mechanism of the Will’, ‘impelled toward power and command’ by its ‘reasonless and insatiable hungers’.68

Harold Orel, in turn, considers *The Dynasts* a fitting culmination to all Hardy’s previous work. Edmund Burke’s writings on the sublime prompted his use of

1. perspective from a great height
2. the disorder of diverse materials
3. the lack of dramatic unity (which reflects Burke’s idea of obscurity).

Hardy is ‘attempting to define the nature of man’s relation to unknown and unknowable forces, and doing so confident in the belief that each poet must write his own definition [of epic] and abide by it’; *The Dynasts* modifies the Miltonic relationship between man and God in at least three ways: the celestial machinery, which Hardy chose to invent rather than borrow; the pitiful stature of Napoleon as opposed to the genuine majesty of Adam; and the inability of *The Dynasts* to promise a happy ending.

Another deviation from conventional epic is the attitude towards war: it is insane, bestial and unnecessary.69

Finally, Walter F. Wright agrees with Bailey that retracing Hardy’s explorations in philosophy and poetry is key to understanding *The Dynasts* but disagrees that its philosophic framework (as in other important work) is traceable both to his extensive reading of the 1860s poets and philosophers and to his own ‘philosophic impressions’ which are remarkably eclectic, not a borrowing from any individual thinker. It is consistently pointed towards an effort to reconcile determinism with man’s capacity for moral choice. Hardy’s attitude towards metrics and poetic technique is, similarly, the result of careful, analytical studies of a host of earlier writers – his notes and comments indicate that he sought to learn from others without denying the truth of his own thinking and feeling and that when he revised *The Dynasts* he employed basically the same pattern of thought and procedure. That is, he studied extensively the history of the Napoleonic era but steadfastly


refused to allow his respect for history to override his conviction that fact had to be interpreted imaginatively; the finished drama is, therefore, conspicuously faithful to historical fact and rich in historical detail, but it remains an individualized imaginative synthesis rather than a literal transcription of its sources.\textsuperscript{70}

At the turn of the next decade several new works demonstrate that much Wessex ground remained unbroken. Jean Brooks, for example, argues the unity and wholeness of Hardy’s vision, regardless of genre: the source of his power is poetic imagination, the ability to see ‘the basic but multiple faces of experience’ and to ‘give them equal weight but no synthesis’; Hardy’s world view is more than just his philosophy; his overtly philosophic poems are occasionally problematic in that they deny his world view, ‘the human being with his capacity to feel’; his best poems replace metaphysical concern with a fully honest and detailed response to the physical world as it is recorded by human feeling and thought. His work is poetic throughout, especially in his fiction where he is concerned with ‘the metaphysic in the physical fact’.\textsuperscript{71}

Michael Millgate examines the unevenness of achievement of Hardy’s fiction. During his ‘Apprenticeship’ (\textit{DR}, \textit{UGT} and \textit{PBE}) one finds ‘a heavy freight of transferred autobiography, of deeply experienced personal frustration of an intellectual as well as a sexual kind’; the 1870s (\textit{FFMC}, \textit{HE} and \textit{RN}) were years of ‘Achievement’ in which the imaginary realm of Wessex was born: after a period of recession, the 1880s, years of ‘Renewal’, Hardy’s historical imagination turns to creating (in \textit{MC} and \textit{W}) an authentic image of Wessex modelled on the Dorsetshire life he had known as a child.\textsuperscript{72} Bert G. Hornback, by contrast, examines ‘Hardy’s way of expressing, dramatically, the idea of the intensity of experience; involved with this is his denial of time passing as a valid measure of experience, and the manipulation of time-as-history to emphasize and expand the significance of the coincidental events’; in \textit{MC}, his best novel, coincidence results from the actions of his characters: Henchard deserves Susan’s return because in a moral sense he has caused it. In all his works ‘cosmic significance’ is measured by this juxtaposition of past and present.\textsuperscript{73}

Dale Kramer, in a seminal essay on Hardy’s tragic vision, argues that he shows us ‘his sense of ineluctable bafflement at the true conditions of life’; while in the novels ideas obtrude he often manages his art ‘so that the ideas themselves are constantly under fire’, ironized, modified, or even shown to be false. As ‘expresser of the tragic vision’ Hardy is distinguished by ‘the variation in emotional and emotional and

\textsuperscript{70} G-D I, 719, item #3030, citing Walter F. Wright, \textit{The Shaping of The Dynasts: A Study in Thomas Hardy}. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1967.


aesthetic context that he employs’; each of his novels is ‘a separate experiment in form’.

J. Hillis Miller regards detachment as a key concept in Hardy: narrative voice, attitudes of characters in the novels and the epic machinery of The Dynasts express the same detachment of consciousness which is fundamental to his world view. A pattern emerges by which the detached mind confronts a world possessing attractive but dangerous energies, yet by means of indirect response Hardy protects himself by using a spatially and psychologically detached narrator and by viewing the present as if it had occurred long ago. Wessex life is unsatisfactory because it fails to satisfy individual desires; bored, the characters fall in love easily and ‘seek to obtain possession of the persons they desire’ but, simultaneously, they hesitate to consummate their love; when there is intimacy there is disillusionment. Perhaps the most notorious and most widely abhorred instance of the latter is the bridal night scene in Tess, but whether this can stand as a paradigm for the course of true love in Hardy’s novels is doubtful.

So after a century of scholarly criticism and state-of-the-art commentary the life and work of Thomas Hardy, creator of the Wessex novels and composer of over a thousand poems, remains as provocative – albeit stirring new questions with each new decade – as it was a hundred years before.

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75 G-D II, 352, item #3222, citing J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire. Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 1970.
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