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RALPH W. V. ELLIOTT

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A

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

ON

Thomas Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd'

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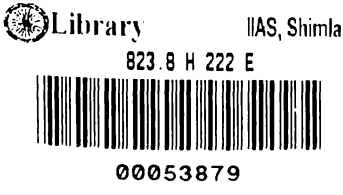

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Foreword

THE present series of *Critical Commentaries* is offered in the belief that, faced with a work of exceptional density of texture or complication of structure, the reader may be helped in his appreciation by a 'conducted tour' or point-by-point critical exposition. These commentaries are intended as a supplement to the material normally supplied in a scholarly edition and not, of course, as a substitute for it. A 'further-reading list' will normally be provided, together with selected questions for discussion.

Hardy and the Wessex Novels

THIS book is concerned with Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, not with his other novels (although most of these are equally deserving of the kind of critical commentary attempted in these pages), nor with his poetry, nor with his life. I shall occasionally refer to some of Hardy's other 'Wessex' novels, as they have come to be called, where such reference helps to illuminate our consideration of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but for the most part our discussion will centre on the latter novel and it will be based on a close study of the text. The aim of a 'critical commentary' is not to provide all the answers to questions which a reader (or an examiner) may ask after a reading of such a book as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but to pose some of the right questions and to suggest some of the forms the answers might take. For example, when we discover that *Far from the Madding Crowd* was first published in serial form, in the monthly magazine *The Cornhill* in 1874, we may wonder whether Hardy's plot or his mode of narration was in any way influenced by this method of publication. Or we may want to examine our reactions to a character like Gabriel Oak who belongs, as one critic, George Wing, has expressed it 'to that race of the astonishingly good Hardyan characters who live in an astonishingly evil and hostile world'. Is Oak so 'astonishingly good'? Is the world in which he lives, with Weatherbury as its centre, so 'astonishingly evil and hostile'?

Such topics will be discussed in this book, but not exhaustively. Hardy's attitude to fate, his use of coincidence, for example, will be mentioned because these play their part in the novels; individual characters, aspects of plot and the like will be

considered in some detail, but again not exhaustively, in the hope that the reader's critical thinking and writing will be directed into fruitful channels. But the hard work and the final evaluating will remain his, no matter what opinions I may express in these pages. The same applies to the discussion of Hardy's narrative technique and style. If a little more emphasis is given to these matters here than to the more conventional discussion topics of plot and characters, it is because they often tend to be neglected when novels are 'studied', despite their equal interest and relevance. The space given to the discussion of style and narrative in *Far from the Madding Crowd* may at first glance seem excessive, but this emphasis represents a deliberate attempt to encourage the study and discussion of prose writing in general and of the problems posed by Hardy's prose style in particular. To this end a fair number of illustrations are quoted from the novel. But these must not be studied in isolation; it is only when they are replaced in their context and are studied alongside other passages in their context that critical comments of any value can be made. As editions differ, page references would have been useless, hence references are to chapters only. But the latter are given in every case, and familiarity with the text, without which there can be no fruitful discussion in any case, will help the reader to find the right places speedily enough. The very necessity of doing this will in its turn help to increase familiarity with the text.

One of the most obvious features shared by Hardy's 'Wessex' novels is, as the name implies, their close connection with that part of south-western England where Hardy himself was born and where he spent most of his life. Indeed, it was in *Far from the Madding Crowd* that he first used the name 'Wessex' to give, as he wrote in the Preface of 1895, 'a territorial definition of some sort' to the region in which the action of this and subsequent novels was located. Although Wessex,

as English readers will be well aware, is not a present-day English county, a thousand years before Hardy wrote this novel it was the chief kingdom of Anglo-Saxon England under Alfred the Great and his successors; and in some ways, as the novels suggest, life had not changed in these thousand years as radically in this part of England as it had done in others. The primeval character of Norcombe Hill in *Far from the Madding Crowd* or of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*; the slow, unbroken cycle of the seasons and the steady pursuit of pastoral activities generation after generation; the very speech of the rustics, are all as much evidence of a continuity which was precious to Hardy as the more tangible prehistoric encampments and Anglo-Saxon remains, and the medieval village churches and thatched cottages which are still to be found in Dorset and its adjoining counties.

Hardy loved this countryside and knew it intimately, and its links with the past — visible, moral, linguistic — are an important element of the Wessex novels and provide a key to a fuller understanding of them. The novels deal not only with particular individuals in particular situations, but with a deep-rooted way of life whose roots were being inexorably eaten away by processes of change and destruction which filled Hardy with a dismay first sporadically discernible in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but unmistakable in the gloom which broods over much of *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* — a destruction which was, as one critic has written, 'necessarily painful and tragic'. Human passions and predicaments may not change, but the Wessex novels could not now be written, as Hardy wrote them, 'from within', in an age when new motorways are 'opening up' the south-west and the streets of Dorchester are choked for half the year with the cars of tourists, a variety of traveller which, as Hardy put it in ch. 42, 'had hardly developed into a

distinct species at this date'. Hence, when A. J. Guérard writes that 'we are repelled or left indifferent by what charmed that earlier generation' which first read these books, he ignores all those readers for whom these aspects of the Wessex novels are not just part of their attraction but part of their meaning: 'the regionalist's ear for dialect, the botanist's eye for the minutiae of field and tree, the architect's eye for ancient mansions, and the farmer's eye for sheepshearings'. Just as Chaucer's pilgrims belonged to Southwark and the Canterbury road of the thirteen-eighties, so do Hardy's men and women belong to the 'Wessex' of 'Weatherbury' and 'Little Hintock' and 'Casterbridge' five hundred years later. They think and talk and act like real men and women, but men and women of a particular time and place: to have recorded this time and place with such fidelity is as much a part of Hardy's achievement in the Wessex novels as to have evoked with imaginative insight and compassion the actions and passions of the men and women themselves.

The Story

If we were asked to reduce the plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd* to its bare essentials, the result would probably be something like this: 'A young woman is courted by three men; she marries the third. The second kills the third in a fit of jealousy and is imprisoned for life. The woman then marries the first.' Nothing could look much simpler, and few plots could look less promising when stated as baldly as this. Yet out of such simple, unpromising matter Hardy has created a masterpiece. How he achieved this it will be our task to discover in this book.

To begin with, look again at our bald summary: in it the 'actors', as we might call them for the moment, are all anonymous — a young woman, three men — whereas in the novel they are given names — Bathsheba, Gabriel Oak, Boldwood, Troy. And with the names go personalities, carefully created and developed as the story proceeds, until we know each one of the four as an individual endowed by the author with outward looks and inward characteristics quite distinct from those of the others. And as the 'actors' come to life, so does the story, for their paths are made to cross and their lives are made to interact in such a way that we, the readers, become absorbed in all that happens to them, however trivial these happenings may be in themselves. The story of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, then, is not just the story of a young woman, but of Bathsheba Everdene, 'hot and hasty' (ch. 53), and of the three men who fall in love with her: Gabriel Oak, 'generous and true' (ch. 38); farmer Boldwood, whose 'natural manner has always been dark and strange' (ch. 51); and Sergeant Troy, 'a clever fellow, and up to everything' (ch. 15). With such a strongly contrasted trio of suitors, things were bound to happen, and they did.

What these 'things' are and how the characters react to them is the matter of the novel. But matter alone is not enough to create a masterpiece, however interesting the characters may be. It requires narrative skill to arouse and sustain our interest, and a style of writing which pleases and satisfies us. Even the most exciting story remains unsatisfactory if it is written in a shoddy way; while on the other hand no amount of polished writing can compensate for characters which are dull or incredible or fail to come to life. The measure of the success of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, then, lies in the way in which it combines an absorbing narrative about interesting, life-like characters with an appropriate, satisfying manner of telling. These three aspects of the novel — character, narrative art, and style — will therefore be our chief topics of discussion.

But the story, however simple in outline, cannot be ignored altogether, for Hardy makes us interested in what happens in the novel as well as in his actors and in his art. Indeed, without the events and episodes in and around Weatherbury to bring them to life, the characters would merely be a portrait gallery, a series of pictures admirably painted but lifeless. That most of the happenings are commonplace, like the sending of a valentine or a chance meeting on a narrow footpath in the dark, is an important clue to Hardy's technique as a story-teller. In the serene, age-old routine of his Wessex villages, anything sensational would be as out of place as a medieval barn in the heart of New York. The most sensational event in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is the shooting of Troy, an incident which probably leaves the modern reader, nurtured on westerns and television thrillers, pretty cold; whereas in the novel the whole countryside is 'thoroughly aroused': the women 'huddled aghast against the walls' and the men stupefied and bewildered (chs. 53, 54). All the other notable incidents in the book are a good deal less sensational and they are important not in them-

selves but in the reactions of the several characters to them. A good example is the action in ch. 40, 'On Casterbridge Highway'. It is a very moving chapter, and, indirectly, the incident it describes vitally affects all the main characters in the novel. Yet all that really happens in the chapter, page after page of it, is that a sick woman manages to cover two miles of highway to reach the Casterbridge workhouse. It is a wholly personal and a very limited episode; viewed against the vast panorama of human affairs it seems trivial and unimportant. Yet Hardy captures our attention and makes us feel, vaguely perhaps at first, but uneasily, that this incident somehow is tremendously important, and eventually we realize that Fanny's struggle and death affect and alter the lives of all the main actors in the book.

The obscurity which attends Fanny's life and death is an indication of an important aspect of the theme of the novel as suggested by its title. Hardy deliberately chooses out-of-the-way country settings for all his Wessex novels, and peoples them with ordinary country people leading ordinary, uneventful lives far from the noisy hubs of human affairs. In doing this, he is suggesting that human lives are shaped much less by world-shattering events than by the steady sequence of commonplace actions and occurrences which, though insignificant in themselves, none the less mould our characters and direct our lives. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* the eventual outcome of the many trivial actions and incidents which make up the story is not an unhappy one, for Gabriel's constancy and patient devotion are rewarded in the end, and we are led to assume that Bathsheba, after all her sufferings, will find with him the happiness she could not find with Troy. In some of his other novels, notably *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's view of the influences which shape the lives of his characters is much less

kindly and he concludes the tragedy of Tess, for example, with the bitter comment, 'The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess'. The echo of Shakespeare's lines, in *King Lear*,

> As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
> They kill us for their sport,

is unmistakable. *Far from the Madding Crowd* is less concerned with the external influences that shape our lives than with actions that spring from character and with the conflicts between the characters. Yet in this novel, too, Hardy repeatedly hints at some external force or forces at work, and several important developments are made to hinge on 'those whimsical coincidences' (ch. 2) which assume such large proportions in others of his novels. We find these hints more frequently in the latter part of the novel when the web of circumstances is tightened more closely around the chief actors: there is the 'singular accident' of the gargoyle (ch. 46), for example, or the reference to 'Gabriel's malignant star' (ch. 49), or the poignant suggestion that Bathsheba 'felt coerced by a force stronger than her own will' (ch. 51). If 'coincidences' and 'circumstances' and 'fate' are 'whimsical' at first, with the dual suggestion of quaintness and caprice in this word (chs. 2, 27), the quaintness becomes increasingly ironical as the novel progresses. Courses of events initiated by the actions of the characters themselves are being taken over by such 'forces', leaving the men and women powerless and wretched. Fanny's death and the events immediately following illustrate these increasingly ironical workings of 'fate':

> Every one except Gabriel Oak then left the room. He still indecisively lingered beside the body. He was deeply troubled at the wretchedly ironical aspect that circumstances were putting on with regard to Troy's wife, and at his own powerlessness to counteract

them. In spite of his careful manœuvring all this day, the very worst event that could in any way have happened in connection with the burial had happened now. Oak imagined a terrible discovery resulting from this afternoon's work that might cast over Bathsheba's life a shade which the interposition of many lapsing years might but indifferently lighten, and which nothing at all might altogether remove. (ch. 42)

Fanny Robin, of all the characters in the novel the meekest and mildest, becomes the tool of this irony. Yet there is nothing forced or unnatural in the process. The events which bring her body into Bathsheba's house and cast upon the latter 'a garish light of mockery, and set upon all things about her an ironical smile', were shaped, as the story makes clear enough, in a 'natural, unobtrusive, yet effectual manner' (ch. 43). It happened to be Joseph Poorgrass, the most timid of the rustics, who was charged with collecting the body; it happened to grow foggy on the way back to Weatherbury; it happened that the 'owners of the two most appreciative throats in the neighbourhood' (ch. 42) were sitting in the Buck's Head; it happened that Oak forgot to ask Poorgrass for the registrar's certificate when he took charge of the waggon. Each one a trivial incident, but in sum devastating. And human 'manœuvring' is of no avail. Troy, too, discovers this. Earlier in the novel we had been told that Troy's activities 'were exercised on whatever object chance might place in their way' (ch. 25); but now chance was becoming too much for him also, and his 'romantic doings' in the churchyard were of no more sympathetic concern to grim 'fate' and events 'leagued together' (ch. 45) than the antics of flies are to wanton boys.

If the ruinous torrent from the gargoyle's jaws is a 'singular accident' (ch. 46), Hardy provides ample explanation for it, as he does with the other coincidences that influence the lives of the characters of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Oak's

appearance at the end of ch. 14, Boldwood's presence 'under the portico of the old corn-exchange' in ch. 48, Troy's dramatic entry in ch. 53, all these and other incidents are accounted for credibly enough. 'Strange conjunctions of circumstances,' Hardy has written, 'particularly those of a trivial everyday kind, are so frequent in an ordinary life that we grow used to their unaccountableness, and forget the question whether the very long odds against such juxtaposition is not almost a disproof of it being a matter of chance at all.' Nor, we should remember, is fate always inimical in this novel. Joseph Poorgrass acknowledges 'a happy Providence' despite all his and other people's 'calamities' (chs. 8, 15), and if Gabriel Oak had a malignant star, it was 'assuredly setting fast' as the novel draws to its close (ch. 49).

The dependence of human beings on external 'forces' hinted at in such phrases is underlined by the close interaction between human lives and the world of nature in Hardy's work. It is a vast world, timeless and 'indestructible' (ch. 2), with its sweep of heath and hills, and it vibrant manifestations of storms and ice. But in *Far from the Madding Crowd* it is also a lovely world whose intimate beauties are again and again described by Hardy with love and skill. Changes in nature's mood from the lovely to the violent are reflected by the changes and contrasts in the moods of the characters, just as the changing seasons have their image in the successive activities of the farmers and shepherds, and there is a natural rhythm in pastoral and agricultural communities which was so much part of Hardy's own background that it becomes the rhythm of his novel. The story progresses slowly, rhythmically, measured as much by the succession of lambing and shearing and harvesting as by the ebb and flow in the lives and fortunes of the characters. And repeatedly and deliberately Hardy links some turning-point in the affairs of his people with some country

event, like Boldwood's offer of marriage with the sheep-washing (ch. 19), or Bathsheba's 'capitulation' to Troy with the hay-making (ch. 26), or the harvest supper and dance with the great storm (chs. 36, 37).

These are all important aspects of the novel, but they do not constitute the story, although they contribute to it. It is quite possible to describe country life and the changing patterns of the seasons without making a story of them, but the result would be social history or geography rather than literature. We turn to a novel because we are looking for a story, and a story must be about something sufficiently interesting, even exceptional, to justify its telling. Hence the question 'what is *Far from the Madding Crowd* about?' is a proper one to ask, and the right answer is that it is about love. To Hardy, love was the ruling passion in life, and it is the central theme of all his major novels. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the lives of three men are closely interwoven because they are all in love with the same woman, Bathsheba, and she, in her turn, is plunged into the throes of a passion which carries her to the verge of a tragic disillusionment, only just averted by the more kindly fate Hardy apportions to her at the end of the book. The story of the novel is mainly the story of Bathsheba's development from a vain, proud, headstrong young woman into a woman made wise by experience and chastened by sorrow. At either end of this road along which Bathsheba is made to travel, Hardy places, like milestones, the two smiles which begin and end her story: at the opening 'she parted her lips and smiled' (ch. 1), vain, self-confident, and as fresh and green as 'the myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her'; at the close 'Oak laughed, and Bathsheba smiled (for she never laughed readily now)' (ch. 57). The transformation was the work of just three years, and its chief agent was love.

There are several clear stages in Bathsheba's development.

At first, love is merely a pleasant thought for her, a source of potential delight and innocent fun:

> 'Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband.' (ch. 4)

She flings love, like a toy, 'idly and unreflectingly' (ch. 13), at Boldwood, utterly unconscious of the possible consequence of her action, for 'of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of love subjectively she knew nothing' (ch. 13); but something of its power is revealed when she discovers with sore dismay the effect of her valentine upon the lonely, dignified farmer.

The same blindness prevents her early recognition of Gabriel's devotion and of Troy's true nature, and it is the business of the story to bring about this recognition, step by step. After Troy's disappearance and the renewal of Boldwood's suit, there is nothing left of the first rosy view of love; instead, Bathsheba exclaims, 'love is an utterly bygone, sorry, worn-out, miserable thing with me' (ch. 51); but this is not Hardy's last word, for the painful process of recognition is not yet over. Neither the marriage with Troy, nor a loveless union with Boldwood can satisfy Bathsheba or, for that matter, us, the readers. And as the story began, so it closes, with Oak; allowing Bathsheba to emerge from her suffering into a relationship with Gabriel, which Hardy declares to be the only secure foundation of true love:

> Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship — *camaraderie* — usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where,

however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death — that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (ch. 56)

From this vantage point at the end of the novel, we can recognize the importance of that 'mass of hard prosaic reality' which makes up so much of the story: it is both the background to Bathsheba's involvement with Boldwood and Troy, and the training ground for her ultimate happiness with Oak. The *camaraderie* of which Hardy thinks so highly finds its most poignant, and an almost heroic, expression in the scene in ch. 37 in which Bathsheba and Oak toil side by side to save her ricks from the storm. In the face of 'an infuriated universe' in which everything else seems to be rent asunder these two are joined in close physical proximity by a shared purpose which was to prove a much firmer bond in the long run than the infatuation which first drew Bathsheba to Troy. But the prosiac reality is rarely of such heroic proportions. Much of the background in *Far from the Madding Crowd* consists of 'the pettinesses that enter so largely into all earthly living and doing', the 'sorry household realities', and 'moments of commonplace' (ch. 19). That Hardy devotes so much space and minute description to the affairs of household and farm, the scrubbing and dusting, hiring and selling, lambing and shearing and harvesting, must be regarded as part of his purpose as much as his probings into the souls of men and women. In fact they go together. Human relationships do not exist in a vacuum, and Boldwood's apotheosis of Bathsheba might have been less romantic and disastrous if he had gained access to her house in ch. 9 and seen her as 'a fright with dust' in the middle of piles of domestic junk, for deflation from the idealized to the everyday is a salutary antidote to romantic dreams. Hence Gabriel's

early vision of Bathsheba and his workaday appearance through most of the novel are made to augur well for their ultimate compatibility and happiness. The importance of the novel's domestic and agricultural commonplaces thus becomes obvious: they are not mere decorative externals, but the shaping and controlling environment which makes Bathsheba and Oak and the rest think and talk and act the way they do.

Nor does it interfere with our enjoyment of the novel that we are always conscious of Oak's presence in the background, and probably suspect the likely outcome of the story. Hardy was not writing a thriller nor interested in creating the suspense of a detective novel. If we suspect almost from the start that Bathsheba will eventually marry Oak, our interest shifts, quite properly, to wanting to know how she came to recognize that he was the right man for her after all. I said 'quite properly' because, as I have tried to show, it is this recognition of true love and true virtue in a man which lies at the heart of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. If the end of the novel satisfies us it is partly because our expectation is fulfilled, and partly because we are relieved that Bathsheba is restored to the happiness and serenity which our sympathy and liking for her have been hoping for. 'The ending is a compromise between that of tragedy and comedy,' writes R. A. Scott-James. 'Gabriel marries Bathsheba, but not till his rivals have been tragically removed.' The simple, unpromising plot with which we began this chapter has turned out to be the blueprint of a thoroughly absorbing love-story.

The Characters

HARDY takes great pains with his characters. A thorough study of any of them demands a careful reading of the whole book, and an entire chapter may be devoted to the introduction of one major character (*see* ch. 25). To illustrate this point, consider the numerous remarks made about Boldwood in the course of the novel. His first introduction, in ch. 9, is sketchy and indirect:

> 'Lord! 'tis a gentleman! I see the top of his hat.' . . .
> 'Who is Mr. Boldwood?' said Bathsheba.
> 'A gentleman-farmer at Little Weatherbury.'
> 'Married?'
> 'No, miss.'
> 'How old is he?'
> 'Forty, I should say — very handsome — rather stern-looking — and rich.' . . .
> . . . 'He's a very kind man that way, but Lord — there!'
> 'What?'
> 'Never was such a hopeless man for a woman! He's been courted by sixes and sevens — all the girls, gentle and simple, for miles round, have tried him.'

The externals are there and a hint or two of what is to come, especially in Liddy's pregnant, ambiguous comment 'never was such a hopeless man for a woman,' but that is all. We have yet to meet Boldwood face to face. When we do, in ch. 12, we are made aware that 'one characteristic pre-eminently marked him — dignity.' There follows the incident of the valentine, and ch. 14 with its suggestion of 'nervous excitability' brings the first hint of change. This hint is followed by increasingly forceful expressions as Boldwood is more and more dominated by

his passion. In ch. 17 Boldwood 'for the first time really looked at' Bathsheba, as Hardy puts it with the help of a splendid simile, 'blankly... in the way a reaper looks up at a passing train — as something foreign to his element, and but dimly understood'. He has to ask a neighbour whether Miss Everdene is considered handsome; yet already he is capable of growing 'hot down to his hands with an incipient jealousy'. In ch. 18 the picture is enlarged further as Hardy dwells on Boldwood's unusual nature, in which resources for good and evil are held in a 'perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces'. We are prepared for violent emotional upheavals by such phrases as 'his wild capabilities' and 'a hotbed of tropic intensity', and we know that the damage has been done. By the time we reach ch. 31 we are no longer surprised by Boldwood's 'unreasonable anger' and 'astounding wells of fevered feeling'. In ch. 34 his degradation reaches pathetic depths, and again and again Hardy stresses the change which has overtaken him: 'His manner had lapsed quite from that of the firm and dignified Boldwood of former times'; 'there was a nervous twitching of Boldwood's tightly closed lips, and his face became bathed in a clammy dew'; 'Troy paused in secret amazement at Boldwood's wild infatuation'. The suggestion of abnormality made in the same chapter (34) is taken up again in chs. 49, 51 and 52, and confirmed by the final 'frenzied look' and 'gnashing despair' of ch. 53. The possible changes in Boldwood's character at which Hardy had hinted in ch. 18 had come about, and Boldwood's final gesture is all the more pathetic because it still contains a relic of his former dignity:

> Then he broke from Samway, crossed the room to Bathsheba, and kissed her hand. He put on his hat, opened the door, and went into the darkness, nobody thinking of preventing him. (ch. 53)

The two important points which emerge from this example of characterization are, firstly, the fact that Hardy's major

characters change and develop in the course of the novel, and secondly, that the process of characterization is a continuous one for as long as the person concerned plays a part in the story.

But not all the characters change. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Oak is the main exception among the principal 'actors'. His very name, Oak, suggests some of his chief virtues: strength, bluntness, constancy, and these, as well as his gentleness and selflessness, his 'industry and chronic good spirits' (ch. 2), we are repeatedly reminded of. Oak had to remain the same right through the book to make sense of Bathsheba's painful road to wisdom; he might indeed be compared to a large, solid tree from whose protective shelter an impetuous Bathsheba flees early in the story to return, duly chastened by tempests, at the end. Gabriel, moreover, is closest, of all the main actors in the novel, to nature and shares with it something of its seeming timelessness. 'Static' is the word Hardy first uses to describe this characteristic: 'His special power, morally, physically, and mentally, was static' (ch. 2); and later, equally telling words are employed: 'placid', 'regular', 'even-tempered' (ch. 5). He is able to brave fire and storm, and possesses a love and understanding of animals such as is rare even in country folk. Of all the farm people he is the only one capable of relieving the agonies of Bathsheba's stricken sheep in ch. 21, and his handling of the newborn lambs is as tender and humane as his pity for the untimely end of his own flock in ch. 5. The combination of oak-like strength with the gentleness of a mother (*see* ch. 37) is well illustrated in Gabriel's reactions to the several incidents of the storm-scene. Pre-occupied with his anxiety about the fate of Bathsheba's wheat and barley he kicks against something outside his door:

> It was a large toad humbly travelling across the path. Oak took it up, thinking it might be better to kill the creature to save it from pain; but finding it uninjured, he placed it again among the grass. (ch. 36)

The same tenderness animates his words to Bathsheba after their joint efforts on the ricks not long afterwards:

> ... and he said to her, gently as a mother — 'I think you had better go indoors now, you are tired.' (ch. 37)

And in between these two moments, before Bathsheba joins him, he slaves with all his enormous physical strength while the revellers are snoring in the barn and the storm gathers and then breaks overhead. We may think occasionally that Oak's virtues are too many, and his faults too few, to ring true, and that his static nature implies an improbable lack of response to events which touch him closely. But, in the long run, we feel that such criticism is not justified; Oak's understanding of Bathsheba, his blunt, often tactless, advice to her, his 'inward melancholy' (ch. 6), his moments of anger, his touchiness with some of the country folk (as in ch. 15) — all these redeem him in our eyes as a thoroughly credible person, and, once we have accepted him, his place in our hearts is assured. And if we still have any doubts left, they are likely to be resolved by the picture of Oak, cheerful to the point of smugness, enjoying his new role of double supervisor of Bathsheba's and Boldwood's farms, trotting happily around the countryside as if he owned the lot, while his respective employers were 'sitting in their respective homes in gloomy and sad seclusion' (ch. 49).

Nor do the rustics change or develop with the story. They seem so much part of the Weatherbury scene that Hardy makes them partake of the latter's timelessness and changelessness, best symbolized perhaps in the ancient Maltster, 'whom neither news, fire, rain, nor thunder could draw from his hole' (ch. 8), and who 'seemed to approach the grave as a hyperbolic curve approaches a straight line — less directly as he got nearer, till it was doubtful if he would ever reach it at all' (ch. 15). 'Weatherbury was immutable,' exclaims Hardy (ch. 22), and

such people as Coggan, Poorgrass, Susan Tall's husband, and Matthew Moon, that 'singular framework of clothes with nothing of any consequence inside them' (ch. 10), had always inhabited it, and lived and worked and died in it. They are simple, kindly people, 'people of unalterable ideas' (ch. 39), nurtured on the Bible whose phrases pepper their speech, superstitious ('breaking a key is a dreadful bodement' (ch. 33)), and completely hemmed in by their own narrow world in which 'ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase' (ch. 22). It is not surprising that their horizons are limited, for their lives are rooted to the soil which their forefathers had been tilling since the days of King Alfred. These were the days before farm-workers took off in their 'Minis' for their annual paid holidays on the continent, when events were reckoned by the seasons with their long spells of duty and short breaks, by Lady Day and 'Sexajessamine Sunday' (ch. 15). To the folk of Hardy's Wessex the dismissal of a thieving bailiff and the disappearance of a servant girl constitute 'a night of horrors' (ch. 8), the pulling down of a cottage or an apple-tree calls forth the comment: 'Ah! stirring times we live in — stirring times' (ch. 15), and a traveller to Bath was a 'navigator' to a strange 'kingdom' (ch. 33). The country virtues embodied in the Weatherbury folk, their seeming timelessness, their basic honesty and good humour, the roots which hold them to their soil and their past, these they share with Gabriel Oak, for he is made one of them. He drinks with them at the malthouse, no more mindful of the 'clane dirt' than the rest of them (ch. 8), and he speaks their language and understands their ways of thought. The sympathy that grows up between Coggan and Oak is all the more moving for being devoid of frills and only half articulate, not quite on the canine level of George but akin to it. If Oak is singled out from among his fellows it is because he has other qualities, not least his youth and good

looks, which fit him for a more exalted role in the novel; but from his first appearance in Weatherbury to his final sincere, unaffected 'souls' and 'old friends' Oak remains a true son of Wessex. To make him play his role effectively Hardy makes Oak, as we have seen, as much an individual as Boldwood or Troy, but the importance of the rustics to the story is collective rather than individual. They act like a chorus, commenting on the action and on the principal characters and taking part in the rural activities, the 'hard prosaic reality', which form the background of the novel. They also speak like a chorus, and now and then Hardy abandons all pretence at a realistic presentation of dialogue and makes 'the conclave' (ch. 15), or 'the supper party' (ch. 13) or simply 'all' (ch. 10) speak in unison in order to underline their collective function. There is a good deal of native wit and shrewdness in the commentary uttered by the rustic chorus and Hardy relies heavily on it for much of the humour and rustic flavour of *Far from the Madding Crowd.* The conversations in the malthouse or the Buck's Head are crammed with insight into the world and ways of Wessex, and they help at the same time to illuminate the main action and the main characters: the rustics may be simple people, but they are not simpletons.

Some of the members of this rustic chorus are distinguished by individual traits of character or appearance which single them out from the rest, but these traits are not important to the plot of the novel, though they contribute to its humour. True, the fact that Coggan and Clark were the 'owners of the two most appreciative throats in the neighbourhood' (ch. 42) is responsible for Joseph Poorgrass's tarrying at the Buck's Head as much as the latter's timidity, but these traits are neither developed into character-studies nor made to influence the story of Bathsheba and her suitors. Through them, however, the reader becomes aware that he is confronted with human

beings, not cold abstractions or impersonal embodiments of rustic virtues or vices. It is a method of caricature rather than of characterization. Coggan can be recognized from behind by the fat red nape of his neck (ch. 50), Joseph Poorgrass by his 'saintly profile' (ch. 50) as much as by his timidity and his tendency to suffer from 'a multiplying eye' (ch. 42). Matthew Moon is the one who is always ready to sympathize with other people's afflictions, while Clark it is who 'secreted mirth on all occasions for special discharge at popular parties' and made others pay for his drinks (ch. 8). It is a happy compromise on Hardy's part to have avoided creating on the one hand too much interest in his rustics by too detailed characterization, and on the other hand too lifeless a set of shadows to fit adequately and convincingly into the very real world of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Even Fanny, who does influence the story to a considerable extent, is hardly characterized. Her littleness and slightness are our first, and remain our most enduring impressions, from her first introduction in ch. 7 to the telling image of the dead leaves in ch. 40. Pity and interest are immediately aroused, however:

> It was a slim girl, rather thinly clad.
>
> 'Good-night to you,' said Gabriel heartily.
>
> 'Good-night,' said the girl to Gabriel.
>
> The voice was unexpectedly attractive; it was the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance; common in descriptions, rare in experience....
>
> ... She extended her hand; Gabriel his. In feeling for each other's palm in the gloom before the money could be passed, a minute incident occurred which told much. Gabriel's fingers alighted on the young woman's wrist. It was beating with a throb of tragic intensity. He had frequently felt the same quick, hard beat in the femoral artery of his lambs when overdriven. It suggested a consumption too great of a vitality which, to judge from her figure and stature, was already too little. (ch. 7)

Ch. 11 strongly reinforces this impression of slightness and almost complete anonymity by describing her in such phrases as 'the little shape', 'the blurred spot', 'the little spot', and with its suggestion of helplessness and vulnerability such language reinforces our pity as well, until we think of her as Boldwood does, as 'poor Fanny' (ch. 15). Yet it is Fanny alone, poor, 'silly' Fanny, who succeeds in evoking whatever there is of worth and permanence in Troy's affections. The 'hoarse laugh' with which Troy dismisses her after her mistake in ch. 16 has become 'a strangely gentle . . . voice' when they meet again on Casterbridge Highway in ch. 39, and Troy's behaviour over Fanny's coffin and grave suggests an attachment in which her belief in his 'high honour' (ch. 15) was matched by at least some sincerity of feeling on his part:

> What Troy did was to sink upon his knees with an indefinable union of remorse and reverence upon his face, and, bending over Fanny Robin, gently kissed her, as one would kiss an infant asleep to avoid awakening it. (ch. 43)

At the same time, the pull of the senses was irresistibly strong in Troy, and even after his impassioned outburst over the dead Fanny, and his cruel dismissal of Bathsheba, he was capable of having his feelings aroused afresh by the latter when he sees her again at the Sheep Fair:

> Troy found unexpected chords of feeling to be stirred again within him as they had been stirred earlier in the day. She was handsome as ever, and she was his. (ch. 50)

But fickleness is no crime, and Troy, for all his philandering nature, is no villain. Indeed, there is no villain in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Yet the sensuality of Troy and the superficiality of his feelings for Bathsheba are an important element in the novel: they provide a contrast for both the silent con-

stancy of Gabriel's love and the passionate frenzy of Boldwood's. Superficially, it is the dashing soldier, with his handsome appearance, easy conversation, and adroit sword play, who appears the most attractive of Bathsheba's three suitors, and it is no wonder that Bathsheba succumbs to his charm, for 'Troy's deformities lay deep down from a woman's vision, whilst his embellishments were upon the very surface' (ch. 29). The contrast with 'homely Oak, whose defects were patent to the blindest, and whose virtues were as metals in a mine' (ch. 29), and who, compared with Troy, 'had a melancholy tendency to look like a candle beside gas' (ch. 36) is strongly stressed by Hardy in order to make Bathsheba's 'capitulation' all the more convincing. The contrast between Boldwood and Troy is no less striking, and we are not surprised, surely, that Bathsheba falls for the hand some charmer and marries him.

From the very beginning of the novel, Bathsheba's twofold nature is revealed to us: she is a sensible, practical, independent young woman who can manage a farm, but she cannot manage her own feelings. She is a woman, says Hardy, 'with some good sense in reasoning on subjects *wherein her heart was not involved*' (ch. 17). Both the extent of her self-knowledge and her blindness towards others are apparent as early as ch. 4 when she answers Oak's proposals of marriage across the berries of the low, stunted holly bush with the words,

> 'It wouldn't do, Mr. Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know.'

The blindness, as we saw in ch. 2, persists through the episode with the valentine and into her entanglement with Troy. Bathsheba believes all that Troy tells her about his church-going, for instance (ch. 29), partly because she is so naïve in her dealings with men, and partly because she herself is such an honest person and neither a 'schemer' nor a 'trifler'

(ch. 18). Laban Tall sums up her character well and speaks for us, the readers, too, when he says of Bathsheba:

> 'She's hot and hasty, but she's a brave girl who'll never tell a lie however much the truth may harm her, and I've no cause to wish her evil.' (ch. 53)

Not only have we no cause to wish her evil, but we decidedly wish her well, for the story of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is *her* story, and once we have started reading it, our interest in this vain, proud, impetuous, attractive young woman is aroused, and it is kept up as we follow her fortunes through the pages of the book. Perhaps 'misfortunes' would be the more accurate word, for Bathsheba suffers much as a result of her inability to tame her impetuous nature by reasoned judgment. An excitable temper and a series of 'rash acts', as she herself calls them (ch. 51), are the manifestations of this impetuous nature, and both cause a good deal of unhappiness to herself and others. Her fits of temper are not unattractive, for Hardy is careful not to weaken our sympathy for his heroine, hence 'she never looked so well as when she was angry' (ch. 21), but in the long run her emotional equilibrium suffers from being so frequently assaulted both from within herself and from without. 'Emotional convulsions seemed to have become the commonplaces of her history' (ch. 46) is a sad comment to make upon one who only a little before had possessed all the skittishness and playfulness of a young animal, but it is not the whole truth. For all her 'emotional convulsions', indeed because of them, Bathsheba's character gains in strength, and the tribute paid to her by the surgeon — 'she must have the nerve of a stoic!' (ch. 54) — is as much a comment on her resolution as on her fortitude.

That some readers and critics have found it hard to like Bathsheba is perhaps not surprising in view of her faults and

weaknesses, her too ready capitulation to Troy, her capricious treatment of Oak, and her disastrous toying with Boldwood. 'Alternately vague and coarse, and . . . always artificial', is how another great novelist, Henry James, described Hardy's heroine when she was first presented to the public in 1874, adding: 'We cannot say that we either understand or like Bathsheba'. None of these seem to me particularly apt epithets for Bathsheba Everdene, and the most damning of them, 'artificial', is the least appropriate in the light of the novel as a whole. Liddy gets far closer to the truth when she describes her mistress as 'so almighty womanish' and incidentally reveals her own feminine heart so touchingly by adding: 'I wish I had half your failing that way' (ch. 30). And vague? If this means that Bathsheba found it hard to translate her reasoning, her logic, her 'perfect syllogisms' (ch. 20) into anything but impulsive actions, into that occasionally 'desperate impetuosity' with which, for example, she reveals to Oak the motives of her marriage to Troy (ch. 37), then we may agree with Henry James. But the charge of coarseness can be laid against Bathsheba only on the superficial grounds that she is more at home in the farmyard than the drawing room, and even this is only partly true, for Bathsheba is as much capable of exercising a natural dignity at appropriate moments as of displaying such spiritual 'refinements' as candour and contrition.

Some readers, then, may not like Bathsheba, but there is no excuse for exaggerating either her faults or her mistakes, as George Wing tends to do when he writes: 'The point is that Bathsheba is irresponsibly flirtatious: her mating-calls are uncontrollable and irresistible, and if she pays for this high and undiscerning sexuality, there would seem, under her contemporary social code, to be no great injustice done. All told, she gets away with it rather lightly', and concerning Troy: 'Yet, after all, Bathsheba damaged his life almost as much as he

damaged hers. He was prepared to stand by Fanny Robin. He was prepared to marry her.' Thus to accuse Bathsheba of preventing Troy from marrying Fanny is surely to misread *Far from the Madding Crowd* in an effort to whitewash Troy at Bathsheba's expense. And does Bathsheba 'get away with it rather lightly'? Admittedly, she does not die at the end of the novel, but for some of Hardy's women who do, death means a welcome relief. For Bathsheba the frivolous teasing of Boldwood brought unending contrition and agony of spirit, and her entanglement with Troy unspeakable suffering. At the end of the novel she experiences 'an absolute hunger for pity and sympathy' (ch. 56), and it is a token of our own compassion for her that we welcome with relief and satisfaction the end of her agonies. Bathsheba at the end of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a much chastened and a much wiser woman, and if we like her at all, we like her all the better for this.

There is one character in *Far from the Madding Crowd* yet to be considered: the landscape. Accustomed as we are to consider characterization in a novel in terms only of human beings, this may seem a strange claim to make; yet in three important ways, the lan dscape in *Far from the Madding Crowd* behaves like a human character: it is alive, its moods change, and it affects the human actors of the novel. 'The earth, then, is alive in Hardy,' writes Professor Bonamy Dobrée, and further: 'His descriptions are amazing, not only for bringing the very substance of the scene before our eyes, but for what they imply; they are never mere decoration, a sort of frieze thrown across the background, as they are in Scott, for instance. With Hardy, the earth labours, suffers, and groans, is scarred with experience like any human being'. This role played by Hardy's landscapes becomes more pronounced in his later novels, notably *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, but the earth plays its part in *Far from the*

Madding Crowd also. Again and again a harmony is established between a human soul undergoing some poignant experience and what the environment is or does at the same time. Such is the accord between 'the unresting world' with its 'silent throes' and Bathsheba's 'troubled spirit' at the end of ch. 32. Such is the sickness of the night in ch. 36 in which Troy succeeds in plunging all the workfolk into the drunken stupor that nearly spelt ruin for Bathsheba's farm. Before the revel began, 'the night had a sinister aspect'; after its drunken conclusion, 'the night had a haggard look, like a sick thing'. In chs. 53 and 54 it is again night, and a blanket of heavy darkness lies over the disastrous re-entry of Troy, and veils the final exit of Boldwood. The latter's mood, near the end of ch. 52, had to some extent kept in step with 'the twilight deepening to darkness', as 'a deep solemnity' once again gave place, as night fell, to 'a reserved and sombre expression . . . and his feverish anxiety continued to show its existence'. In the following chapter Hardy repeatedly draws attention to the blackness outside and suggests a feeling of ominousness that seems to pass between the people and the dark night:

> A group of men stood in the dark . . .
>
> 'Dark as a hedge, to-night, isn't it?' . . .
>
> The dark tree tops gently rocking against the sky and occasionally shivering in a slight wind. (ch. 53)

It is into this darkness that Boldwood disappears after the shooting and our final shadowy glimpse of him comes as Oak rides past him on the dark highway to summon a doctor: 'a square-figured pedestrian passing along under the dark hedge in the same direction as his own' (ch. 54).

There is a finely observed example of the accord between the human, animal, and natural world in the scene preceding the great storm. The behaviour of toad, slug, spiders, and sheep

confirms Oak's premonition and his determination to save Bathsheba's wheat and barley:

> Apparently there was to be a thunder-storm, and afterwards a cold continuous rain. The creeping things seemed to know all about the later rain, but little of the interpolated thunder-storm; whilst the sheep knew all about the thunder-storm and nothing of the later rain. (ch. 36)

Hardy frequently uses similar language to foster the impression that the earth, the seasons, the elements are alive and active. The opening paragraphs of ch. 2 illustrate this, and so do phrases like these:

> . . . little brooks, whose quivering surfaces were braided along their centres, and folded into creases at the sides. (ch. 6)

> . . . the mead and moor momentarily received additional clothing, only to appear momentarily more naked thereby. (ch. 11)

> The grass about the margin at this season was a sight to remember long — in a minor sort of way. Its activity in sucking up moisture from the rich damp sod was almost a process observable by the eye. (ch. 19)

> The trees stood in an attitude of intentness. (ch. 42)

The cumulative effect of such diction is to produce the feeling that there is an element, a power, to be reckoned with in the lives of the people of Weatherbury. The natural world is not there simply, passively, to be cultivated, harvested, enjoyed, used, or ignored; it is an active force, in the long run much stronger, more lasting than the human beings whose lives it both affects and reflects.

In addition, such diction fosters a feeling of intimacy. We get to know particular seasons and particular places in the novel as thoroughly as we get to know Bathsheba or Oak. Norcombe Hill, the sheep-washing pool, Casterbridge Highway, Weatherbury churchyard are good examples. If you study

the chapters in which these places figure, you will see how Hardy's skilful use of salient detail creates a feeling of familiarity with the particular place for us, and much the same can be said of the seasons, even of particular kinds of weather. Hardy achieves this because he himself was thoroughly familiar with the scenes and seasons he describes. The following paragraph illustrates this point well:

> The changes of the seasons are less obtrusive on spots of this kind than amid woodland scenery. Still, to a close observer, they are just as perceptible; the difference is that their media of manifestation are less trite and familiar than such well-known ones as the bursting of the buds or the fall of the leaf. Many are not so stealthy and gradual as we may be apt to imagine in considering the general torpidity of a moor or waste. Winter, in coming to the country hereabout, advanced in well-marked stages, wherein might have been successively observed the retreat of the snakes, the transformation of the ferns, the filling of the pools, a rising of fogs, the embrowning by frost, the collapse of the fungi, and an obliteration by snow. (ch. 11)

Few novelists have used such a narrow compass for the actions of their stories as Hardy did in his Wessex novels. As a result, of course, there is much that is left out of these novels: city-life and countries outside England, for example, and characters drawn from other backgrounds and social classes. These may be limitations, but we do not feel them as such while we are reading *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for within the little world of Weatherbury the same passions move its people and the same essential human experiences are theirs as belong to people in the larger world beyond. By restricting himself as he did, to his own familiar background, Hardy achieved a perfect sympathy between his characters and their setting, and he avoided the danger of creating characters that might ring untrue. A few such characters exist in some of the other Wessex novels; in *Far from the Madding Crowd* Troy comes closest to being

something of an outsider, for he is 'well-connected', was 'sent to Casterbridge Grammar School for years and years' (ch. 24), and has obviously seen a good deal more of the world than the folk of Weatherbury. But Troy plays his part in the novel in the same environment as the rest, although his upbringing and calling make him less sensitive to it than the farmers and shepherds and labourers are. This was a wise choice on Hardy's part, for 'he is never at ease in the boudoir and drawing room, but always longing to get back to the malthouse and the barn', as Mr. Cyril Aldred puts it.

To some extent Hardy's choice of character and setting was influenced by his strong distrust of so-called progress and his dislike of changes and innovations which threatened the old country ways and the very appearance of the countryside he loved. Hardy's was no mere sentimental antiquarianism; when he says, after describing the medieval shearing-barn in ch. 22, that 'the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn', he is expressing a firm belief in a harmonious equilibrium between man and his environment which cannot be upset without direst consequences. *Far from the Madding Crowd* contains only a few hints of what was to become an increasingly dominant theme in the later Wessex novels, but the hints are there. In the 1895 Preface to the novel, for example, Hardy mentions the disappearance of buildings and customs characteristic of the 'Wessex' of the novels. Gone are the ancient malthouse and many of the thatched cottages, the shearing-supper and the practice of divination by Bible and key: 'The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break of continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folklore, close inter-social relations, and

eccentric individualities.' One corollary of this attachment to the country and its ways and ancient traditions is Hardy's attitude to towns and cities, a mixture of distrust and dislike. Even the county town of 'Wessex' comes in for some strictures in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Remarks like this, from ch. 22 of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, are characteristic of Hardy's point of view: 'God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town'. Or this:

> The vegetable world begins to move and swell and the saps to rise, till in the completest silence of lone gardens and trackless plantations, where everything seems helpless and still after the bond and slavery of frost, there are bustlings, strainings, united thrusts, and pulls-all-together, in comparison with which the powerful tugs of cranes and pulleys in a noisy city are but pigmy efforts. (ch. 18)

For a building to be old-fashioned is a recommendation with Hardy. If changes are introduced, they are more often than not 'reversals', 'strange deformities, tremendous paralyses' (ch. 9), and the same view is extended to people and their customs. Compared with Troy's frivolous flirtatiousness, Oak's earnestness in courting Bathsheba is 'old-fashioned' (ch. 3), and the rustic modesty of a caller is a 'refinement' of manner 'of which townspeople, with their cards and announcements, have no notion whatever' (ch. 4). Perhaps Hardy erred in his denigration of towns and townspeople, for the contrast between cities and country is not simply one between black and white, but as he watched the disappearance and destruction of so much he held dear and believed valuable, can he be blamed for crying out against the insidious march of 'progress'?

What I have said about the setting of the novel and about the importance of the natural world to story and characters will help to substantiate the claim that the landscape deserves to be considered in the role of a separate character in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. We have seen how alive it is and how its

moods change. Finally, how it affects its human inhabitants is well suggested by Mr. Scott-James when he describes 'these places as influences subtly entering into the lives of the men and women born and bred there, who inherit memories, habits, and instincts handed on through the centuries'.

Narrative Technique

Far from the Madding Crowd tells a story, the story of Bathsheba Everdene and her three suitors, and whether a story appeals to us or not depends to a great extent on the way it is told. On a first reading of the book we are probably not aware of the several devices Hardy uses to make and keep us interested in the story; and this is as it should be, for we don't really want the mechanics of story-telling to obtrude any more than we want to hear all the noises the engine makes or watch all its parts moving when we are driving a car. On the other hand, as soon as our interest in the novel becomes a critical interest, we want to know what makes it work, what methods the writer uses to make his story interesting and his characters alive, and how he manages the words he uses.

Two important related aspects of Hardy's narrative technique are *continuity* and *the use of allusion*. We can consider continuity under three heads: rhythm, style, and action. Right from the beginning of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy achieves a leisurely rhythm that sets the pace for the whole novel. I suggested earlier that this rhythm reflects the natural progress of country life with its regular recurrence of seasons and duties and festivities, and that Hardy skilfully weaves the important experiences of his characters into the natural cycle of rustic life. In this way we are carried naturally and smoothly from the opening of the story in the winter-month of December on to St. Valentine's Day in February, into the spring, into the summer when Troy first appears and so on through the changing seasons. But this continuity is also one of style, of patterns and the movement of sentences which carry us steadily

through the novel. This is easily illustrated from almost every page of the book, for example:

> When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun. (ch. 1)

> For a moment Boldwood stood so inertly after this that his soul seemed to have been entirely exhaled with the breath of his passionate words. He turned his face away, and withdrew, and his form was soon covered over by the twilight as his footsteps mixed in with the low hiss of the leafy trees. (ch. 31)

Thirdly, the continuity is one of action. The story is never allowed to lag; it progresses steadily, rhythmically from one incident to the next. Hardy introduces his principal characters gradually, but once they have appeared on the stage of the novel we never lose sight of them for long. Even the chapters in which the rustic chorus gathers and discourses sometimes at considerable length are important links in the chain of events, and help to maintain that regular rhythm so characteristic of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Variations in the tempo of the narrative do, of course, occur. A musical work is no less a unified composition for including fast and slow movements, and in the same way, a novel has episodes which move at different speeds. The opening scene of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for instance, is extremely leisurely. Such words as 'exceedingly mild', 'perfectly still', 'sat motionless', 'idly' (repeated several times), 'reverie' express the leisurely movement as much as the even flow of the paragraphs and steady rhythm of the sentences. Troy's waiting in church (ch. 16), punctuated by the ticking of the clock, is another good example of slow movement which will repay close study. On the other hand, there is the 'feverish' chapter 34 with its rapid dialogue of short, quick sentences, the

whole racing towards its climax, as Boldwood discovers the marriage and Troy triumphantly locks himself into Bathsheba's house with 'another peal of laughter'. That such a tempo is the exception in *Far from the Madding Crowd* helps to underline the fact that the basic movement of the narrative, one of orderly progress, is what the musician would call *andante*, 'at a walking pace'. That this basic movement can span different periods of time in the action of the novel is apparent from a comparison, for example, of chs. 42 and 49: the former covers a few hours, from the collection of Fanny's coffin at the Casterbridge workhouse to its depositing in Bathsheba's sitting-room; the latter opens 'in the later autumn' and within a few pages moves on steadily, rhythmically, to 'the late summer' of the following year. Such is the unobtrusiveness of Hardy's narrative art.

This narrative continuity is helped along also by repeated allusions to what is to come. Our interest is sharpened, our appetite whetted, by such hints; they make us want to read on. Look at the following passages in their contexts and you will see how important their allusive function is in sustaining our interest:

> Luckily for her present, unluckily for her future tranquillity, her understanding had not yet told her what Boldwood was. (ch. 18)

> Subsequent events caused one of the verses to be remembered for many months, and even years, by more than one of those who were gathered there. (ch. 23)

> The impending night appeared to concentrate in his eye. (ch. 31)

> His mind sped into the future, and saw there enacted in years of leisure the scenes of repentance that would ensue from this work of haste. (ch. 35)

'Ring for some more brandy, Pennyways, I felt an awful shudder just then!' (ch. 52)

'More harm may come of this than we know of.' (ch. 53)

Another method Hardy uses to sustain our interest is akin to *suspense*, although this is perhaps too strong a word for so unsensational a novel as *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Suspense, of course, means keying the reader up to a high pitch of excitement and expectancy, and then leaving him suspended, dangling, while the scene of action is temporarily shifted, as in the famous porter-scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Chapter 52, aptly called 'Converging Courses', is handled in this way: seven times the scene changes as we flit speedily from one group to the next and on to the third, and then once more right round. It is a chapter full of hints and omens, and prepares us effectively for the climax to come. The opening section describes some of the preparations for Boldwood's fateful Christmas party. There are only three paragraphs, but they suffice to reveal the atmosphere: 'abnormal and incongruous', 'unnatural', 'not good'; 'the spirit of revelry was wanting . . . and a shadow seemed to move about the rooms'. Sections II and V move the scene to Bathsheba and Liddy and continue the ominous atmosphere with such phrases as 'but there's no escaping now' and Bathsheba's 'I don't know what's the matter, I feel wretched at one time, and buoyant at another'. In Sections III and VI the actors are Boldwood and Oak. The former is unusually fastidious and 'difficult to please', and the by now familiar epithets reappear: 'vehement', 'feverish', 'sombre'. Oak is still in the background, for his hour had not yet come, but he is 'uneasy'. And, finally, there is, in Sections IV and VII, a sharp contrast as we watch Troy drinking and smoking and laughing, preparing to reclaim Bathsheba, for she is after all good-looking and wealthy — and his wife. Yet the feeling of menace is here too: 'Ring for some more brandy,

Pennyways, I felt an awful shudder just then!' Another good example of such interrupted narrative is the break at the end of ch. 16: Fanny has mistaken the church in which she was to have been married — a mistake of grave consequence to all the main actors in the novel — and Troy, 'with a light irony, and turning from her walked rapidly away'. At this tense moment, the scene shifts, we are left in suspense as to Fanny's fate and turn to Boldwood instead. We become absorbed in the progress of the latter's wooing of Bathsheba until she almost promises to be his wife — and then Troy reappears on the scene, and ch. 24 closes with the ominous remark,

> It was a fatal omission of Boldwood's that he had never once told her she was beautiful.

— a remark which we recall with some wistfulness when in ch. 53 — far too late — Boldwood says to Bathsheba:

> 'You are still a very beautiful woman' ...
> However, it had not much effect now ...

Hardy makes use of suspense also in the tent-episode in ch. 50 and for a short time we are left in doubt regarding Boldwood's ultimate fate after his trial and sentence. Although suspense means interrupting the narrative, it is yet an agent of continuity, because it keeps our interest alive and makes us want to read on.

Dialogue is an instrument both of characterization and of narrative in a novel. Characters reveal themselves as they speak, and events can be created, reported, or discussed in conversation. If you read *Far from the Madding Crowd* carefully, you will notice the many different uses to which dialogue is put, and you will see how Hardy handles it, often convincingly, sometimes not very successfully. A good example of the importance of dialogue is to be found in the first two meetings between Bathsheba and Troy. Troy is an accomplished talker;

and the mixture of charm, flattery, and persuasive flow of language (his 'rare invention' Bathsheba calls it in ch. 26) overwhelms her:

> Bathsheba really knew not what to say. (ch. 24)
>
> Bathsheba was absolutely speechless. (ch. 26)

and she capitulates with one final, unfinished, helpless stammer:

> 'No — that is — I certainly have heard Liddy say they do, but — ' . . . Never did a fragile tailless sentence convey a more perfect meaning. (ch. 26)

Not all the dialogue in these two chapters is handled with equal skill, however. Towards the end of ch. 26 the conversation between Troy and Bathsheba becomes stilted, and has an unnatural ring about it which detracts from its effectiveness. The same is sometimes true of the speech of the rustic characters. Matthew Moon, as we know him from ch. 10, is hardly likely to have spoken like this:

> 'Twas only wildness that made him a soldier, and maids rather like your man of sin.' (ch. 33)

Nor would words like these have come naturally to William Smallbury, or any other of the rustic chorus for that matter:

> 'Every looker-on's inside shook with the blows of the great drum to his deepest vitals.' (ch. 10)

That Hardy came to be aware of such lapses, perhaps as a result of contemporary criticism, is suggested by occasional changes introduced into the novel when, after initial publication as a serial in 1874, it was reprinted in book form. Thus, for example, the word 'philandering' was changed to the much more likely, and picturesque, colloquialism 'smack-and-coddle' in Gabriel's 'none of that dalliance-talk — that smack-and-coddle style of yours — about Miss Everdene' in ch. 15.

But such instances are greatly outnumbered by Hardy's

effective and convincing passages of dialogue. Most of the rustic speech rings true, with its double negatives and wrong pronouns and generous sprinkling of dialect words:

'Our mis'ess has too much sense under they knots of black hair to do such a mad thing.' (ch. 33)

'She won't be in Bath by no daylight!' (ch. 32)

'And you whop and slap at your work without any trouble, and everything goes on like sticks a-breaking.' (ch. 42)

In the same way the speech of the main actors reflects their natures and remains true to character: Oak's slow, measured speech ('I can't match you, I know, in mapping out my mind upon my tongue', ch. 3) reflects his temperament as convincingly as Troy's banter and 'rare invention' reflect his. And as the characters react to different situations or change, like Boldwood and Bathsheba, in the course of the novel, so does their speech vary or alter while yet remaining true to character. We would not expect Boldwood to talk at the end of the novel, when jealousy and shattered hopes have driven him to the verge of madness, as he had done at the beginning. To gauge the difference we need only compare the 'deep voice' of Boldwood's first words in ch. 9 with 'the thin tones' which 'hardly a soul in the assembly recognized . . . to be those of Boldwood' in ch. 53, and to examine like milestones along this road the solemn offer of marriage to Bathsheba in ch. 19, the frenzied utterances to Troy in ch. 34, the curt responses to Oak in ch. 38, and the feverish search for reassurance in ch. 52.

In all the Wessex novels Hardy relies to a great extent on *description* and *the creation of atmosphere* as aids to narrative. The rustic environment, as we have seen, is of great importance in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, hence the rustic chorus, the rustic dialogue, and the use of the natural environment as almost a live character. The scenes where important incidents

occur are closely and accurately described and made memorable for us by a skilful selection of detail. Detail, often minute, is indeed the key to Hardy's descriptive technique, whether it is of a face, a building, a landscape, or a storm. Oak's watch in ch. 1, Bathsheba's house in ch. 9, the pool and meadow in ch. 19, the fog in ch. 42 — these are just a few examples of longer descriptions which will repay careful study. Bathsheba's house, to take one of these examples, gave Hardy the opportunity to make use of the architectural knowledge which he had acquired during his apprenticeship and employment as an architect in his early manhood. It is an old house, as Hardy reminds us several times in the novel ('a hoary building', ch. 9; 'the mouldy pile', ch. 13; 'Bathsheba's crannied and mouldy halls', ch. 32), once a manorial hall whose pillared front now has a sleepy look, and whose columnar chimneys and coped gables remain as witnesses of past grandeur. There are mosses on the stone tiling and along the front path. It is at the back of the building, facing the courtyard of farm buildings, that its present animation resides. The inside has as much the aura of age as the outside, with its heavy oak staircase, balusters, and railing, its warped and creaking floors, and rattling doors and windows. No wonder that 'the atmosphere of the place seemed as old as the walls' (ch. 13), and that it was a cold and cheerless 'bower' in winter.

But descriptions need not be long to be effective. A vista or a facial expression can be caught, as by a camera, in one poignant phrase:

> Henery shook his head, and smiled one of the bitter smiles, dragging all the flesh of his forehead into a corrugated heap in the centre. (ch. 15)

> He lingered and lingered on, till there was no difference between the eastern and western expanses of sky, and the timid hares began to limp courageously round the dim hillocks. (ch. 34)

The corrugated heap, the limping hares are as much an indication of Hardy's accuracy of observation and knowledge and use of detail as the list of flowers for Fanny's hearse (ch. 41), or the breeds of sheep at the Greenhill Fair (ch. 50). These details add authenticity as well as atmosphere to the novel, for atmosphere is not merely the writing of ornamental 'purple' passages, largely for their own sakes, but rather the creation of a setting or of the mood of a scene in which the reader can believe either because of its realistic or because of its imaginative truth. Perhaps it is just because the descriptive details chosen are often so minute and intimate, that we believe all the more readily in the truth of the scene and enter into its mood. You will find numerous examples in the novel of such convincing detail; consider, for instance, how Oak puts out his light in ch. 2: he does not merely extinguish it, but 'extinguished the lantern by blowing into it and then pinching the snuff'. Just what is the force of these additional details? Or analyse for yourselves the effect of this piece of close observation at the beginning of ch. 35:

> The creeping plants about the old manor-house were bowed with rows of heavy water drops, which had upon objects behind them the effect of minute lenses of high magnifying power,

and perhaps study alongside it the similar figure from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:

> She hardly observed (but her creator does not fail to do so) that a tear descended slowly upon Clare's cheek, a tear so large that it magnified the pores of the skin over which it rolled, like the object-lens of a microscope.

Such passages are doubtlessly 'ornamental', but that is rarely their only function. You will remember Professor Bonamy Dobrée's view, quoted earlier, that Hardy's descriptions 'are never mere decoration', because the natural world plays such

an important role in Hardy's novels. If the natural world is considered to be alive and active, then the function of descriptions of scenes and seasons is to relate the natural world closely to the activities of the human actors in whom we are interested. The harmony established between natural setting and human mood, previously mentioned, depends upon descriptive detail that will create the appropriate atmosphere. Again, this can be done as effectively in a sentence as in a paragraph; in either way Hardy excels, and often it is the poet in him who speaks, as he does in his poem 'Weathers', in which landscape, animals, people, and poet join in their reaction to fair weather and foul:

I

This is the weather the cuckoo likes,
And so do I;
When showers betumble the chestnut spikes,
And nestlings fly:
And the little brown nightingale bills his best,
And they sit outside at 'The Travellers' Rest',
And maids come forth sprig-muslin drest,
And citizens dream of the south and west,
And so do I.

II

This is the weather the shepherd shuns,
And so do I;
When beeches drip in browns and duns,
And thresh, and ply;
And hill-hid tides throb, throe on throe,
And meadow rivulets overflow,
And drops on gate-bars hang in a row,
And rooks in families homeward go,
And so do I.

When Boldwood goes to confront Bathsheba after the valentine incident, 'the ground was melodious with ripples, and the sky

with larks' (ch. 18). When the great storm approaches, Oak's apprehensions are reflected not merely by the 'sinister aspect' of the night, but by the instinctive actions of various animals; each actor, natural, human, animal, conveys the atmosphere of impending terrors (ch. 36). In ch. 43, Bathsheba, restless and racked by suspicions and uncertainty, leaves her house to seek advice from Oak and immediately enters Oak's serene world, where 'every blade, every twig was still. The air was yet thick with moisture, though somewhat less dense than during the afternoon, and a steady smack of drops upon the fallen leaves under the boughs was almost musical in its soothing regularity.' The 'soothing regularity' outside is the image of the peaceful scene inside Gabriel's cottage, where he is seen first reading, then praying, and it is what Bathsheba seeks but cannot find. The contrast between her world and his, her 'wretchedness in full activity' and 'the atmosphere of content which seemed to spread from that little dwelling' is underlined by the fact that the natural world is sharing Oak's serenity. Bathsheba is isolated and becomes even more so as she returns home, her mission unfulfilled, 'soothing regularity' left far behind. And so the chapter moves on to its tremendous, terrifying climax.

Now and again a touch of *humour* enters into one of Hardy's descriptions, as when he is speaking of the Casterbridge workhouse, relieving for a moment the tension of ch. 40, but humour in *Far from the Madding Crowd* belongs mainly to the rustics. Collectively as well as individually the country people are made to convey the impression that there is a good deal of comedy in life to compensate for its hardships. In the later Wessex novels, this impression markedly decreases, but in *Far from the Madding Crowd* the rustic interludes are largely comic ones. From the beginning we are made aware that the Weatherbury folk 'were as hardy, merry, thriving, wicked a set

as any in the whole country' (ch. 6), and the rest of the novel bears this out. Chs. 8 and 15 in the malthouse, ch. 10 in the old hall, ch. 42 in the Buck's Head deserve close study in this connection. What does their humorous content contribute to the novel as a whole? Is it mere light relief? Or is it a more serious comment on human life and affairs? Nor should we forget, when seeking answers to these questions, that the chapters just mentioned are in every case contrasted with chapters in which Fanny Robin appears: in ch. 7 Oak meets Fanny by the churchyard wall, in ch. 11 Fanny visits Troy's barracks, in ch. 16 she was to have married Troy, and ch. 42 is dominated by her coffin. Fanny is as much a member of the country community as the others, but throughout the novel she stands apart. The contrast between Fanny's tragedy and the comic chorus is an important ingredient of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, perhaps nowhere more obviously so than in ch. 42. The choice of Joseph Poorgrass, who would tremble and blush with terror at the slightest provocation (*see* ch. 15), as the driver of Fanny's hearse is in itself a stroke of genius. No wonder that 'his spirits were oozing out of him quite' as he finds himself and his peculiar burden enveloped in a fog with its 'unfathomable gloom amid the high trees on each hand, indistinct, shadowless, and spectre-like in their monochrome of grey'. To say that 'he felt anything but cheerful' is a delightful understatement. And then comes the crowning moment of comedy as Joseph joins Coggan and Clark in the Buck's Head to drink himself into a state of blissful forgetfulness while the body of poor Fanny lies outside on its waggon under the trees.

Among the most entertaining passages in the rustic interludes are undoubtedly those in which we get glimpses of such outsiders as Coggan's first wife Charlotte or Bathsheba's parents. The charge of coarseness which contemporary

reviewers levelled against Hardy for his inclusion of the story of Bathsheba's father in ch. 8 is one to which modern readers of the novel would probably not subscribe. The present generation, nurtured on stronger meat, is not likely to wince at the humorous account of a husband, 'faithful and true enough' to his marriage-vow, but with a roving eye, asking his wife to take off her wedding-ring in order to fancy her still only his sweetheart, so that

> 'as soon as he could thoroughly fancy he was doing wrong and committing the seventh, ' a got to like her as well as ever, and they lived on a perfect picture of mutel love.'

The fact that, as Poorgrass points out, 'a happy Providence kept it from being any worse. You see, he might have gone the bad road and given his eyes to unlawfulness entirely — yes, gross unlawfulness, so to say it,' and that Mr. Everdene became in his old age a right godly man who 'took to saying "Amen" almost as loud as the clerk', did not prevent Hardy from laying himself open to the charge of coarseness in Victorian England. Why then the inclusion of such material in *Far from the Madding Crowd*? How far is it relevant to the story, to the development of character, to atmosphere? Atmosphere is certainly created, or enhanced, by these homely details gossiped about in Warren's Malthouse, and much of the rustic wit and shrewdness is expended on just these topics. Whether Hardy intended the reader to draw any conclusions about Bathsheba herself from the fickleness and marital oddities of her father, we can only surmise. In several of the Wessex novels fathers and mothers play not inconsiderable parts, so perhaps this comic glimpse of Bathsheba's father is not quite as irrelevant as might at first appear.

Elsewhere in the novel, humour is largely incidental and almost wholly verbal. It consists mainly of witty comments or

comparisons and occasionally takes the form of irony. Here are several examples for you to study:

It may have been observed that there is no regular path for getting out of love as there is for getting in. Some people look upon marriage as a short cut that way, but it has been known to fail. (ch. 5)

He added a sigh which had as much archness in it as a sigh could possess without losing its nature altogether. (ch. 24)

This supreme instance of Troy's goodness fell upon Gabriel's ears like the thirteenth stroke of a crazy clock. (ch. 29)

'And I'll always be your friend,' replied Liddy emphatically, at the same time bringing a few more tears into her own eyes, not from any particular necessity, but from an artistic sense of making herself in keeping with the remainder of the picture, which seems to influence women at such times. (ch. 30)

Joseph was suffering from his old complaint, a multiplying eye, and was, therefore, hardly trustworthy as coachman and protector to a woman. (ch. 51)

The best way to study an author's narrative technique, of course, is to subject a portion of narrative, say one chapter, to a close critical analysis. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* several chapters are particularly suitable, such as ch. 11 or ch. 40. Here are a few comments on ch. 40 to suggest how such an analysis might be undertaken.

Ch. 40, 'On Casterbridge Highway', describes the attempt of Fanny Robin, pregnant and dying, to reach the Casterbridge workhouse. Hardy is naturally anxious to rivet our attention and to arouse our sympathy, and to achieve these aims he employs most of the narrative devices which we have discussed. The scene is set upon the deserted highway and the mood of the night is in keeping with Fanny's desperate plight:

When the woman awoke it was to find herself in the depths of a moonless and starless night. A heavy unbroken crust of cloud stretched across the sky, shutting out every speck of heaven; . . .

The darkness of the scene is broken only by the 'weak, soft glow' of the distant 'Casterbridge aurora' and is sharply underlined by the momentary brightness of the passing carriage. In addition to this contrast between lights and darkness, Hardy creates the further contrast between silence and sounds to convey the atmosphere of the scene. Again his method is to select a few effective details. Fanny is utterly alone; even the distant manor-house clock had struck the hour 'from the far depths of shadow... in a small, attenuated tone'. The last human being to have spoken to Fanny had been, significantly, Troy, and

> Now there was not a rustle, not a breeze, not the faintest clash of twigs to keep her company.

Fanny's ordeal takes place in a desolation of darkness and silence. She has to *feel* the marks on the milestone and the sticks among the faggots. Only the distant glow, which is her goal, keeps her going, and when at last she reaches it, it becomes 'the haven of rest to this wearied soul' in the fullest sense, the grave which Fanny herself had vaguely anticipated earlier on.

Half-way through the chapter both sounds and lights gradually begin to return: the dull booming of the morning wind, the bark of a fox, Fanny's own voice calling to the dog, the Casterbridge lights showing up one by one, the pale whiteness of the road, and finally the lamp carried by the man opening the door.

The continuity of the narrative is well managed by a succession of mainly short sentences and words which emphasize with increasing impact the woman's failing strength:

> Her steps became feebler,
> flagging as before,
> she swayed sideways, and fell,
> she essayed a step,
> she dragged her feet on beneath,
> she rose to a stooping posture,

and with such words of movement go the words describing the girl herself: 'the woman' at the opening of the chapter becomes 'the panting heap of clothes' at the end.

Apart from the few words exchanged at the end of the chapter, dialogue is reduced to monologue, for Fanny is alone. There is no need for Hardy's explanation, for most people in such straits would gain comfort from their own voices, and in any case in such a situation the distinction between what is thought and what is uttered is hard to draw. Hence, one moment 'she whispered' and the next 'a thought moved within her like lightning', and both are represented in the text as if spoken aloud. How effective Fanny's utterances are you will be able to judge for yourselves.

There is even a moment of humour in this tense chapter, in the description of the workhouse, but by this time the worst tension is over and we accept this lighter touch as part of the general relief that Fanny's goal is reached. We even accept the bitter irony of the dog's fate as yet another sardonic comment of Hardy's on human ignorance turning its back on nature.

These, then, are some of the ingredients of ch. 40, but the student's analysis will of course need to go further than this in its detailed examination and discussion of the text.

Hardy's Style

In her essay on 'The Novels of Thomas Hardy', the distinguished novelist Virginia Woolf has this to say:

> He feels his way by dint of sagacity, and uncompromising sincerity to the phrase he wants, and it is often of unforgettable pungency. Failing it, he will make do with any homely or clumsy or old-fashioned turn of speech, now of the utmost angularity, now of a bookish elaboration. No style in literature, save Scott's, is so difficult to analyse; it is on the face of it so bad, yet it achieves its aim so unmistakably. As well might one attempt to rationalize the charm of a muddy country road, or of a plain field of roots in winter. And then, like Dorsetshire itself, out of these very elements of stiffness and angularity his prose will put on greatness; will roll with a Latin sonority; will shape itself in a massive and monumental symmetry like that of his own bare downs.

There is much that is valid in Virginia Woolf's criticism, although her comparisons with muddy roads or bare downs are liable to blind us to the subtlety of much of Hardy's writing. It is true, however, that Hardy's style is marked strongly both by its range, from moments of 'unforgettable pungency' to moments of 'the utmost angularity', and by its unpredictability. You never know what to expect next, and therein lies its difficulty of analysis. Few great novelists give the impression of 'making do' with often unhappy, inadequate, heavy-handed phrases or sentences quite as readily as Hardy does. That the resulting blemishes are compensated for by the impact of Hardy's characters, their passions, their stories, the grandeur of his natural scenes, and the much more frequent excellences of style is true, but blemishes they do remain even in the face of so much that is admirable.

You will not find it difficult to spot awkward phrases, involved sentences, trite images, and other stylistic weaknesses in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Here are some instances:

Beside her Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women, which showed that it had not long been accustomed to the phenomenon of eyesight, and often turning to the lantern, which it apparently mistook for the moon, inherited instinct having as yet had little time for correction by experience. (ch. 2)

Bathsheba's momentary impulse at hearing this was to ask why he thought that, till she remembered that, far from being a conceited assumption on Boldwood's part, it was but the natural conclusion of serious reflection based on deceptive premises of her own offering. (ch. 19)

He felt a zephyr curling about his cheek, and turned. It was Bathsheba's breath . . . (ch. 37)

Fetching three other men to assist him, they bore the unconscious truant indoors . . . (ch. 42)

The faults in such passages are easily recognized: the first two instances are sentences which are needlessly involved and wordy, and would gain much by being rewritten at half their length; in the third example, the metaphor of the zephyr is trite as well as incongruous; in the last example, the description of Fanny in her coffin as 'the unconscious truant' is little short of silly. Already his contemporaries noticed such stylistic weaknesses in the novel and were, perhaps, responsible for some slight improvements which Hardy made when the novel was first published in book form, such as with the language of the rustics which we noted earlier. Bathsheba's description as 'a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind' (ch. 1) is a slight improvement on the original 'in a feminine direction', but it is still a clumsy and ugly phrase. In such cases, Hardy was obviously 'making do'.

The 'bookish elaboration' of much of Hardy's diction can also become a weakness, if overdone. Two of Hardy's distinctive mannerisms may both have been in Virginia Woolf's mind when she used this phrase: on the one hand there is Hardy's tendency to 'bookish' language, his liking for long, sonorous words often of Latin origin; on the other hand, there is the steady reliance upon his own reading and learning which characterizes Hardy's style throughout the novel, from the 'Laodicean neutrality' in the first chapter to the echoes of Keats and Shakespeare in the last. A sentence like this is characteristic of the first point:

> Reversals of this kind, strange deformities, tremendous paralyses, are often seen to be inflicted by trade upon edifices — either individual or in the aggregate as streets and towns — which were originally planned for pleasure alone. (ch. 9)

The 'bookish' learning which Hardy displays in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is sufficiently distributed all over the novel not to be over-conspicuous. Classical poets like Homer, Horace, and Virgil, and English poets like Shakespeare, Browning, Keats, and Wordsworth, make their appearance either by quotation or allusion. Perhaps Keats was especially dear to Hardy 'of Wessex', as he is believed to have composed his sonnet 'Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art' somewhere along the Dorset coast when on his way to Rome in 1820. Hardy's own poem 'At Lulworth Cove A Century Back' was written about this incident. The frequent references to painters are worth noting as illustrating Hardy's strongly visual imagination; he responded to paintings with the same attention to detail and colour as to natural objects themselves and often uses the effects of painters to enhance his own descriptions:

> The rain had quite ceased, and the sun was shining through the green, brown, and yellow leaves, now sparkling and varnished by

the raindrops to the brightness of similar effects in the landscapes of Ruysdael and Hobbema, and full of all those infinite beauties that arise from the union of water and colour with high lights. (ch. 46)

Or compare the reference to Poussin's paintings in ch. 22, or to 'Rembrandt effects' in ch. 50. The many biblical echoes throughout *Far from the Madding Crowd* confirm the impression intended by the novel that the Bible played an important role in the life of Weatherbury and its people. Our reactions to these forms of 'bookish elaboration' will vary according to our education. For the educated reader of Hardy's day, the echoes from earlier poets and other erudite allusions created no problem and probably enhanced the enjoyment of the novel; to us a sentence like the following may be both unintelligible and irritating, but then the fault is ours (or our educators'), not Hardy's:

> tranquillity was restored by Jacob Smallbury, who volunteered a ballad as inclusive and interminable as that with which the worthy toper old Silenus amused on a similar occasion the swains Chromis and Mnasylus, and other jolly dogs of his day. (ch. 23)

Just as we are struck by the 'angularities' in Hardy's style, of course, so are we struck by its moments of greatness, and there are many in *Far from the Madding Crowd.* The perfect balance of a well-constructed sentence, the 'unforgettable pungency' of a phrase, the truth of an image, the impact of a single word in the right place — all these are to be found again and again, and these, I suggest, do so much more to help make the novel a success than the weaknesses can do to mar it. We can do no better, to test the validity of this assertion, than consider in turn the sentence, the phrase, the image, and the single word, in an attempt to discover wherein the excellence of Hardy's best writing lies.

Sentence

The best of Hardy's sentences are those in which the 'rustic rhythm' of his narrative is blended with a fine sense of structure. There may be balance or contrast, progress or regress, but there is no lack of control, none of that shapelessness which we noted earlier. Hardy was working hard here, shaping, forming, not merely 'making do', and the result is pleasing, sometimes arresting:

> The self-consciousness shown would have been vanity if a little more pronounced, dignity if a little less. (ch. 3)

> She moved between them as a chaise between carts, was heard after them as a romance after sermons, was felt among them like a breeze among furnaces. (ch. 12)

> He was a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity. (ch. 25)

Sometimes there is a playing with words as well as an ordering:

> Bathsheba, though she had too much understanding to be entirely governed by her womanliness, had too much womanliness to use her understanding to the best advantage. (ch. 29)

Occasionally a deliberately solemn effect is evoked by casting a sentence into biblical mould, with the words and rhythms of the English Bible closely imitated:

> All this infatuation Gabriel saw, and was troubled thereby from the time of his daily journey a-field to the time of his return, and on to the small hours of many a night. (ch. 29)

Sometimes Hardy's workmanship shows through, and though the sentence may still be effective, we may be conscious that it is contrived and its impact is lessened, perhaps, as in this case, by the weight of duplication:

> In arguing on prices she held to her own firmly, as was natural in a dealer, and reduced theirs persistently, as was inevitable in a woman. But there was an elasticity in her firmness which removed

it from obstinacy, as there was a *naïveté* in her cheapening which saved it from meanness. (ch. 12)

At their best, Hardy's sentences are succinct, rhythmical, well-formed; at their worst, shapeless, unmusical, or just plodding, like this one which, although it suggests something of its meaning in its very heavy-footedness, could have been expressed more pleasingly:

Footsteps were heard in the passage, combining in their character the qualities both of weight and measure, rather at the expense of velocity. (ch. 10)

The contrast between the following two sentences should make the point quite clear:

To Boldwood women had been remote phenomena rather than necessary complements — comets of such uncertain aspect, movement, and permanence, that whether their orbits were as geometrical, unchangeable, and as subject to laws as his own, or as absolutely erratic as they superficially appeared, he had not deemed it his duty to consider. (ch. 17)

If anything could be darker than the sky, it was the wall, and if anything could be gloomier than the wall, it was the river beneath. (ch. 11)

Phrase

We might define the phrase as an extension of the word, a combination of words into a group, and it is as a combination that it is memorable. Hardy has many such phrases in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and it is worth acquiring the habit of underlining them as they strike you while reading. Again, we can learn most by studying and analysing examples:

. . . before the event passed on into the heap of bygone things. (ch. 3)

But wisdom lies in moderating mere impressions . . . (ch. 7)

Bathsheba paused to regard the idea at full length. (ch. 13)

. . . the removal of yet another stake from the palisade of cold manners . . . (ch. 27)

. . . wretchedness in full activity. (ch. 43)

The effectiveness of such phrases may be due to several causes. 'The palisade of cold manners' is a metaphor which derives its force both from the aptness of the image itself and from the elaboration of detail ('the removal of yet another stake') which precedes it. 'But wisdom lies in moderating mere impressions' is not figurative language; its aphoristic brevity and succinctness make it memorable, as well as its rhythm and the satisfying moment of alliteration on the two m's. In the first example, the phrase 'the heap of bygone things' appeals by its simple, stark concreteness and by the sense of finality which it lends to the sentence with such seeming ease. The phrase 'wretchedness in full activity' is effective perhaps because the two halves seem to pull in opposite directions: 'wretchedness' and 'full activity' seem at first glance incongruous, although on closer scrutiny we see how effectively the combined phrase conveys Hardy's meaning.

Not all Hardy's phrases are as successful as those quoted. The addition of an adjective may turn a single inoffensive word into an awkward combination, leading at best to clumsiness of phrasing, at worst to absurdity of diction:

She saw him stoop to the grass, pick up the winding lock which he had severed from her manifold tresses . . . (ch. 28)

The dividing-line between such unhappy phrasing and the 'unforgettable pungency' of a phrase is a very fine one, for exactly the same device, the addition of an adjective, can bring about the latter, as in these cases:

It was still the beaming time of evening . . . (ch. 23)

Bathsheba was full of a stimulating turbulence, beside which caution vainly prayed for a hearing. (ch. 32)

Sometimes a phrase is deliberately echoed later in the novel, perhaps slightly varied, and the reader's reaction can be considerably enhanced by recalling the earlier occurrence. Thus Bathsheba's house is a 'mouldy pile' in ch. 13, but 'crannied and mouldy halls' in ch. 33. Boldwood's agony during the exchange with Troy in ch. 34 entails 'a nervous twitching of Boldwood's tightly closed lips': he had just been a witness to a scene as tormenting to his soul as are those in Shakespeare's plays in which Troilus and Othello undergo similar agonies. In ch. 46 it is Troy's turn to suffer, and the phrase used recalls Boldwood: 'his compressed lips moved as those of one in great pain'. The situation is not without poetic justice and a recognition of the echo emphasizes our awareness of this.

Image

Hardy, besides being a novelist, was also a poet, and much of his language in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is figurative in the manner of a poet. An image may be defined as a word-picture which describes something in terms of something else, often in terms of something familiar to us. We might add that it is used mainly for effect. A striking comparison, whether explicit as in a simile, or implicit as in a metaphor, makes its point more forcefully than a bald statement, and it can add greatly to our enjoyment. Gabriel's well-oiled hair sticking to his head like 'wet seaweed round a boulder after the ebb' (ch. 4), or his reply in ch. 6, which 'invariably operated like a rumour of cholera', are good examples of similes which effectively enhance their contexts. There are many such scattered throughout the novel, some, inevitably, more striking than others, but often delightfully witty and apt:

> In juxtaposition with Troy, Oak had a melancholy tendency to look like a candle beside gas, (ch. 36)

which we may compare with a similar image in *Jude the Obscure:*

She was once a woman whose intellect was to mine like a star to a benzoline lamp.

Or these:

. . . the united breathings of the horizontal assemblage forming a subdued roar like London from a distance. (ch. 36)

But her loneliness then was to that of the present time as the solitude of a mountain is to the solitude of a cave. (ch. 43)

The announcement had had an abnormal and incongruous sound, as if one should hear of croquet-playing in a cathedral aisle . . . (ch. 52)

Alongside such relatively straightforward figures, openly declared as it were, we find the image which is thoroughly embedded in the diction without any explicit comparison. Metaphors are of this kind, like the 'palisade of cold manners' discussed earlier. Much of Hardy's diction is unobtrusively figurative, and unless we cultivate a subtle sensitiveness to his use of language, we shall miss a good deal. Liddy's face described as 'a prominent advertisement of the light-hearted English country girl' (ch. 9), the old maltster's 'powers as a mill' (ch. 15), the 'shirtless flock' of shorn sheep in ch. 22, the 'grim mis-shapen body of cloud, in the very teeth of the wind' (ch. 36) — all these are examples of imagery which we are quite liable to miss, either because the image is so unobtrusive, or because our language is so laden with dead metaphors that we have become insensitive to many that are still alive.

Much of Hardy's most effective imagery occurs in passages of description; seeing nature with a poet's eye, he was often able to describe its details imaginatively in words strikingly borrowed from elsewhere. There are some good examples in the description of the fog which overtakes Joseph and his burden: 'It was a sudden overgrowth of atmospheric fungi'; 'the air was an eye suddenly struck blind'; 'the trees stood in an

attitude of intentness' (ch. 42). In some passages of description such figurative language abounds, and the juxtaposition of what I have elsewhere called imaginative truth with realistic truth can become a valuable and effective instrument of style. If we analyse the following passage, we will see which words and phrases describe the fire directly, and which do so in figurative terms, and what each element contributes to the impression of the whole.

> This before Gabriel's eyes was a rick of straw, loosely put together, and the flames darted into it with lightning swiftness. It glowed on the windward side, rising and falling in intensity like the coal of a cigar. Then a superincumbent bundle rolled down with a whisking noise; flames elongated, and bent themselves about with a quiet roar, but no crackle. Banks of smoke went off horizontally at the back like passing clouds, and behind these burned hidden pyres, illuminating the semi-transparent sheet of smoke to a lustrous yellow uniformity. Individual straws in the foreground were consumed in a creeping movement of ruddy heat, as if they were knots of red worms, and above shone imaginary fiery faces, tongues hanging from lips, glaring eyes, and other impish forms, from which at intervals sparks flew in clusters like birds from a nest. (ch. 6)

The direct element of description in this passage is conveyed primarily with the aid of verbs describing the action of the fire: 'darted', 'glowed', 'whisking', 'burned', 'consumed', 'shone', and the appearance of flames and burning straw: 'rising and falling', 'rolled down', 'elongated', 'bent themselves', 'went off', 'illuminating', 'flew'. The effect of this heap of verbs is one of frantic, confused activity. Things are happening, as they do in a fire, in all directions and with different movements and noises. It is worth noting that these verbs are distributed pretty evenly over the whole passage. In addition to this verbal element the passage contains two other main descriptive elements: the direct but non-verbal description giving sub-

stance, colour, noise, and so on, and the figurative description. These are not evenly distributed; instead Hardy begins with very largely factual description, with a few images inserted, and concludes with a densely figurative tail-piece.

The 'rick of straw', 'the flames', 'the windward side', the 'quiet roar', 'pyres', 'smoke', 'straws', and 'sparks' are all part of the actual scene. With the appropriate verbs to add action they would have presented an adequate picture of the burning straw-stack. What then is it that Hardy adds? The 'lightning' swiftness and 'banks' and 'sheet' of smoke introduce metaphorical language, however dead or moribund the metaphors may now be for us. The 'coal of a cigar' and the 'passing clouds' are apt, if not particularly original, similes which help those of us to visualize the burning stack if we have never seen one burn before. But the ending of the passage is of a different calibre. The imagery now becomes original, striking, and crowded: introduced by 'the creeping movement of ruddy heat', itself a good image, the burning straws now become 'knots of red worms', writhing, entangled, luridly intertwined. At the same time the curious gargoyle-imagery suggests weird 'impish' faces and forms 'hanging', 'glaring' down at us, while at the close the more homely image of sparks flying 'in clusters like birds from a nest' returns us with a familiar figure to the actual scene — of straw.

It is a closely observed scene in which the burden of the description is carried by direct, non-figurative, descriptive language. What the imagery does is to add another dimension, to suggest the imaginative truth of red worms and impish forms behind and on top of the realistic truth of flames and sparks. All are part of such an experience, for we can all see a puffing cigar, a fiery face, ruddy heat 'creeping', when we stare into a fire as Gabriel Oak was staring into this one. It is this combination of direct description executed with well-chosen,

suggestive words, with living imagery which makes such a passage effective. And this, we should perhaps remind ourselves at this point, is but one paragraph in a full-length novel!

Word

To take a word out of its context, out of its phrase or sentence, and hold it up for admiration is of course an artificial procedure, because it is only in its context that the word has meaning and life. Hence it is difficult sometimes to distinguish sharply between the impact of a single word in the right place and the impact of the whole context to which it belongs. Yet it does happen, when we read, that some individual word stands out from the rest with a peculiar sense of fitness. We may experience delight, surprise, shock, or simply satisfaction at the word's appropriateness, but each sensation is a tribute to the writer's style, to his understanding of his craft, and his earnest endeavour to find the word that will truly express his meaning, in other words, to what Virginia Woolf called, you will remember, his 'sagacity and uncompromising sincerity'.

Often such a word is surprisingly simple, and its effectiveness may be due solely to its use in an unexpected, unfamiliar context:

> In other directions the fields and sky were so much of one colour by the snow that it was difficult in a hasty glance to tell whereabouts the horizon *occurred* . . . (ch. 14)

Sometimes a word strikes home because it is so completely in keeping with a situation or a mood or character that it acts like a flash of illumination. What could be more fitting than 'Troy was *lolling* beside her' in ch. 36 in which his lazy indifference is so especially prominent? Or consider the impact of 'humbly' in 'It was a large toad *humbly* travelling across the path' in the same chapter. The word is not necessary to the description of the scene as such, but its insertion adds a whole

new dimension. Hardy is looking at nature not simply with his eyes, but with his heart, and we are again reminded that the natural world is not merely a background in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. It does not detract from the effectiveness of this word in this context to realize that Hardy had used it similarly once before. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, published a year earlier than *Far from the Madding Crowd*, occurs the phrase 'a toad humbly labouring along'. But there surely can be no objection to the repetition where a word is so strikingly appropriate. A similar effect is achieved, poignantly, as the stray dog meets Fanny Robin on Casterbridge Highway:

> The animal, who was as homeless as she, *respectfully* withdrew a step or two when the woman moved, . . . (ch. 40)

and more comically in the picture of Bathsheba's cat, in the first chapter of the novel, 'affectionately' surveying the small birds around. The same tendency to personify or humanize nature makes Hardy describe the scrolls of mist in ch. 42 as creeping 'indolently' across the valleys — a splendidly apt word.

Where a single word is pivotal to the sentence, its choice and positioning can contribute much to the structure of the sentence, and this is particularly apparent where two such sentences are made to contrast or balance, as in this paragraph:

> Then this small thesmothete [law-giver] stepped from the table, and *surged* out of the hall, her black silk dress licking up a few straws and dragging them along with a scratching noise upon the floor. Liddy, elevating her feelings to the occasion from a sense of grandeur, *floated* off behind Bathsheba with a milder dignity not entirely free from travesty, and the door was closed. (ch. 10)

With its rhythm and balance, its effective choice of words, its humour, and its touch of bookishness, this passage is a good example of Hardy's writing at its best. No less effect can be obtained by much simpler means, however, as in the stark

sentence 'Presently the gurgoyle *spat*', where the effect of the almost coarse monosyllabic 'spat' is to conjure up vividly all the spitefulness which fate is about to let loose on Troy (ch. 46).

In such a descriptive passage as that of the fire, analysed in the preceding section, we saw the importance of well-chosen, suggestive words. The English language is rich in descriptive words, verbs particularly, and if carefully selected each one can add something new and important to a passage of descriptive prose. Ch. 38, for example, opens with the storm and oncoming rain and Hardy carefully chooses his words to put across the growing ferocity of the elements: 'stirred', 'coursed', 'shifted', 'blew stronger', 'roaming', 'whirled fantastically aloft', 'the wind *snarled* round every corner', 'the trees *rocked* to the bases of their trunks', 'the twigs *clashed* in strife'. Words of movement, action, battle, and fury all.

It would be inadequate to close this discussion without a brief reminder of the place of dialect words in Hardy's diction. These fit naturally into the atmosphere of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and such lively, satisfying mouthfuls as 'What a pucker everything is in!' (ch. 9); 'a poor gawkhammer mortal' (ch. 10); 'She was such a limber maid' (ch. 41); 'and that is ayless a lammocken vagabond' (ch. 52) add their own colour and vitality to the language of the novel. Most editions annotate them for the reader; failing that, the *English Dialect Dictionary* or the large *Oxford English Dictionary* provide glosses. The dialect of Weatherbury is an important local phenomenon, and Hardy is right in giving it its place in his novel. Of course he must not, and does not, overdo it, for that would merely perplex and irritate the reader, but we accept, and surely with pleasure, some indication of the richness and variety of that colourful form of English spoken in the Wessex of Hardy's novels.

Conclusion

THE aim of our discussion, you will remember, was to discover how Hardy managed to create in *Far from the Madding Crowd* a masterpiece out of the seemingly unpromising material of its plot. In stating our aim this way near the beginning of this book, I was, of course, guilty of putting the cart before the horse: I assumed that this novel is a masterpiece before setting out to give my reasons. Now, having examined the evidence before us, we can rectify our method and put the cart behind the horse.

The evidence before us, of course, is the novel itself, nothing else. It is only by reading the story, by asking ourselves questions about its theme and import, about the characters and their behaviour, and by studying Hardy's narrative technique and style, that we can arrive at any valuable critical assessment. If our discussion is a balanced one, then we shall discover faults as well as merits, weaknesses as well as strengths, and this will, in the end, enable us to make up our minds fairly whether or not we like the novel and for what reasons.

That there are faults in *Far from the Madding Crowd* your own reading will have revealed as much as our discussion. Some, as we have seen, are faults of style — clumsiness, 'angularities', the tendency to make do, and so on. There are moments of stilted dialogue, and perhaps even errors of taste or judgement, like the rather offhand dismissal of Boldwood from the scene of the novel at the end of ch. 55. There is the beginning of Hardy's tendency to rely overmuch upon 'singular accidents', as in the case of the gargoyle or of Troy's reappearance at the critical juncture of ch. 53. There are occasional strains upon our credulity in matters of characterization, Oak's doglike

constancy, for example, in the face of so much disappointment, or the almost unbelievable switch in Boldwood's attitude in ch. 34. These are not small matters, and in the hands of a lesser novelist might well have spelt ruin to the novel. If they do not do so in the case of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it can only be because, as the critic and poet Andrew Lang wrote when the novel first appeared, 'its brilliant qualities are likely to neutralize the glare of its equally prominent faults'. I think there is more than a mere neutralizing, for the final impression of the novel is surely a positive one, of a story well told, of human passions brilliantly portrayed and in harmony with a natural environment which Hardy knows how to depict with sympathy and sensitiveness. This sympathy and this sensitiveness pervade the whole book: they extend to all its characters, so that we are made to succumb to the glamour of Troy as well as to love and suffer with Oak and Boldwood. But it is with the character of Bathsheba, I think, that Hardy scores his biggest triumph in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and many of the stylistic blemishes and other faults are forgotten in the face of this splendid creation. Passionate, wilful, charming, Bathsheba compels our attention and wins our admiration. And we are moved, strongly moved I suggest, by the pathos of Bathsheba's suffering as much as by the destruction of Boldwood's dignity and the unflagging devotion of Gabriel Oak. There is much that is noble in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and true nobility never fails to make its mark.

Besides, there is much fine writing in the novel to offset the weaknesses of style which we have discussed. There is the rich, earthy humour of the rustic choruses, the sweep of the seasons, the timeless grandeur of the Wessex countryside, and Hardy's memorable descriptions, ranging from cloudcapped horizons to the subtle beauty of a blade of grass.

Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, there is what,

in his *Apology* to one of his collections of poems, Hardy himself refers to, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, as being the poet's province: 'the application of ideas to life'. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* it is the novelist, not the poet, who is concerned with applying his ideas to life and giving shape and expression to them in story and character. What some of these ideas are we have seen in the course of our discussion. We may not share all of them with Hardy, but we must respect the honesty and consistency with which he works them out in this novel. And the 'life' he has chosen to portray, he has chosen deliberately, within the small compass which he knew well and knew how to recreate faithfully and convincingly. And this is true also of his characters. As H. C. Duffin has well expressed it: 'By choosing his characters from the plebeian and labouring orders he places them under that primal curse of man, the necessity of working for a living. The gain is great. There is a certain grim satisfaction in finding here, as in life, the primary assumption of a relentless struggle for existence that binds its victims with inviolable bonds, so that when trouble comes there is no fairy-flight of escape.' We are back with that 'mass of hard prosaic reality' of which we spoke earlier and to which a good deal of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is devoted. But the prosaic reality by itself is not 'life'; life is what men and women make of themselves, and of each other, within this prosaic reality, and, Hardy insists, what they make of the 'events' or 'circumstances' or 'singular accidents' which beset them. It is because Hardy's men and women are so much part of a natural, often elemental, environment that their passions seem to ring truer than they might have done in the more artificial surroundings of a complex urban or suburban society. For this reason also they seem more attuned to, perhaps better equipped for, the relentlessness of the struggle for existence. When a single thunderstorm or a young dog's

misplaced enthusiasm can wipe out years of hard work in one night, it takes a particular attitude and a particular brand of temperament not to give up. Oak looks at the pool which 'glittered like a dead man's eye' (ch. 5), then he turns away and starts afresh. It is such attitudes and such temperaments that Hardy is interested in in the Wessex novels; hence the juxtaposition of Oak and Boldwood in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, both the playthings of Bathsheba as much as the victims of the buffetings of fate. Why it is that Oak is made to survive the toyings and buffetings to win through in the end is perhaps the most insistent question we are left with when we finally put the novel down, and if we can answer it to our own satisfaction we shall have come much closer to understanding the application of some of Hardy's ideas to life and to assessing how successfully he has done this in prose fiction. That in *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy the poet, the story-teller, the lover and close student of the countryside, and the sympathetic observer of human nature, have collaborated to produce a very fine novel, no one would deny. Is it then claiming too much to call it a masterpiece?

Questions for Discussion

1. Make a detailed critical analysis of **either** chapter 5 **or** chapter 11 of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.
2. Describe any one scene in *Far from the Madding Crowd* which strikes you as particularly dramatic. Give reasons for your choice.
3. What do you think are the functions of the rustic characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd*? How important are these characters to the plot of the novel?
4. Write a character sketch of Fanny Robin and discuss her part in the plot of the novel.
5. Write brief character sketches of Bathsheba's three suitors, and discuss which of the three men appeals to you most and why.
6. Why does Bathsheba 'capitulate' to Troy? Which of her characteristics have prepared us for this event?
7. Give examples of different uses of dialogue in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.
8. What use does Hardy make of 'bookish' allusions in *Far from the Madding Crowd*? What is their effect on his narrative style? Refer to particular examples.
9. Discuss, with illustrations, Hardy's use of imagery in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.
10. Explain and illustrate the remark that 'humour in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is mainly verbal'.
11. Choose six sentences in *Far from the Madding Crowd* which you think well written and six which you think badly written. Analyse these sentences and justify your choice.
12. What hints can you find in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

of Hardy's attachment to the old country ways and his dislike of innovations? Refer to particular passages.

13. 'For Hardy, love is always treated as the major passion in life, and constancy in love is shown as the major virtue.' With this comment in mind, discuss **either** Hardy's choice of characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd* **or** the plot of the novel.
14. What do you understand by the remark that 'characters and settings . . . are in perfect sympathy' in *Far from the Madding Crowd*? Give examples and discuss what this 'sympathy' contributes to the novel as a whole.
15. Do you agree that *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a novel of character, not of fate?

Further Reading

J. W. Beach, *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* (Russell & Russell, New York, 1922; repr. 1962) — contains a chapter on *Far from the Madding Crowd.*

B. Dobrée, 'Thomas Hardy', in *The Lamp and the Lute* (1929), and *English Critical Essays, Twentieth Century*, selected by P. M. Jones (O.U.P., World's Classics, 1933) — a stimulating critical essay.

H. C. Duffin, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels, the Poems, and 'The Dynasts'* (3rd ed., Manchester U.P., 1937) — a full and sympathetic discussion of the novels as well as of Hardy's poetry.

A. J. Guérard, *Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories* (O.U.P., 1949) — a lively, rather technical, critical work.

E. Hardy, *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography* (Hogarth Press, 1954).

R. A. Scott-James, *Thomas Hardy* (Writers and their Work, No. 21; Longmans, 1951; repr. 1961) — a good introduction to Hardy's work, with a select bibliography to 1956.

C. J. Weber, *Hardy of Wessex: his Life and Literary Career* (O.U.P., 1940) — biography.

G. Wing, *Hardy.* (Writers and Critics Series, Oliver & Boyd, 1963) — a provocative, sometimes irritating, but always stimulating study.

Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of Thomas Hardy' in *The Common Reader, Second Series* (Hogarth Press, 1932) — a valuable critical essay.

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