

the pluralist criticism that uses Marxist insights (the rest of us) might simply be a matter of where we hang the labels. Certainly Mr Eagleton has social understandings to offer, but many of his best points, such as his feel for the authenticity of the prose of *Villette* as opposed to the contrived rhetorical flights of *Shirley*, or his analysis of sexual complexities linking Lucy, Dr John and Ginevra, are more or less totally independent of the Marxism.

His general point is that Charlotte Brontë explores the inter-relations between bourgeoisie and aristocracy, this social contrast appearing in her book in the form of a triadic structure, in which the protagonist is torn between a Romantic-radical and an autocratic conservative. This is quite a good description of the structure of *Jane Eyre* (Jane-Rochester-Rivers), but it is hard to see the contrast between Rochester and Rivers in class terms. *Shirley* on the other hand is clearly a novel that deals with social conflict, but in that case the triadic structure is less clear-cut. One would expect (this is of course the kind of pluralist remark Mr Eagleton objects to) that his method would yield more when applied to *Shirley* than to the other novels, and in a way this is so. True, his observation that the major protagonist of the raid on the mill, the working class, is distinguished primarily by its absence is obvious to any modern reader of *Shirley*, and has disappointed hundreds who have picked it up as a novel about the Luddites; but his discussion of *Shirley* herself ("Shirley's 'radicalism' is less a matter of doctrine than of style") relates her impact in the novel to the social forces she embodies—just the sort of insight Mr Eagleton constantly promises and seldom produces.

FINALLY, A FEW WORDS about value-judgments. Mr Eagleton is bold enough to tackle the question, to ask which Brontë novels are the best, and then relate the answer to his social interpretations. His preferences are in fact orthodox: he

thinks *Wuthering Heights* the best of all, and *Jane Eyre* the best of Charlotte's. Mine, as it happens, are not. *Villette* seems to me by far the finest Brontë novel, and I have a very lukewarm admiration for *Wuthering Heights*; further, I think Anne is notably underrated. Turning to Mr Eagleton's arguments from this vantage point of disagreement, I am struck by how ingenious they are, and how utterly unconvincing.

All Charlotte's novels, I would argue, reveal a dangerous "residue" of potentially uncontrollable emotion; and the success of a particular work depends in part on how effectively this is handled.

In *Villette* he finds a "maladjustment" between this emotion and the form of the narrative: "Lucy's intense world is partly severed from the 'objective' narrative, sealed and guarded in a realm of quiet desperation." *Jane Eyre* on the other hand "gives us a brilliantly realised study of an alienated consciousness which remains nervously alert to actual events and places." As a description of how the two books differ, this is admirable; but the value-judgment could so easily be reversed. *Jane Eyre* provides plenty of plot to correspond to and justify the heroine's anxieties and sufferings, and the result is a Gothic thriller; *Villette* makes it clear that Lucy warps and distorts the world around her, and the result is a brilliant study of a neurotic heroine. If there was more "appropriate action" there would be less of Lucy's obsessed sensibility.

There will never be agreement on the merits of the Brontë novels, because it is so difficult to find the right criteria. Whatever their literary merits, competence is not one of them: and the very fact that *Jane Eyre* has a carefully elaborated plot may be as much a point against it as in its favour. We read them for their intensity and their emotional need. "I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book": Thackeray was condescending to her as a woman, but he knew that he was paying a tribute to her power. For all the clumsiness, that power is still alive today.

The Years That Are Past

On Thomas Hardy—By P. N. FURBANK

THIS BIOGRAPHY comes at the right moment, when quite a heap of materials have accumulated for a life of Thomas Hardy, and a legend or two has seeded and sprouted around them. The book, too, has the virtues you might expect from

¹ *Young Thomas Hardy*. By ROBERT GITTINGS. Heinemann, £4.95.

Robert Gittings:¹ it is scholarly, perceptive and judicious, altogether skilful and professional. He has made many discoveries of his own, including one or two startling ones; and he has sifted the recent work of others with an expert sense of relevance and admirable powers of logical inference. Altogether, there is a lot that is new in this book. Robert Gittings says (I don't remember

seeing it suggested elsewhere) that the notion that Emma was hereditarily insane was put into Hardy's head by his second wife, to protect him from the pain of believing what Emma had written about him in her diary. It is convincingly argued, and the plot sounds just like life. Again, Robert Gittings convinces us, there is a clue to *The Well-Beloved* in the fact that, over the years, Hardy fell in love with no less than three of his Sparks cousins—no doubt searching, like Jocelyn Pierston in the novel, for the same family features (his mother's? his own?). And another example of Gittings's method and shrewdness is his demonstration that Hardy's account, in the *Life*, of his dealings with Tinsley the publisher was fictitious, an attempt to improve on boring actuality. Thus, there is no doubt, the biography is a most solid achievement. And if this rest of this review is, to some extent, an attack, it is an attack on a most intelligent and rewarding book.

The nub of the attack is that nowhere in the book, so far as I can remember, does Robert Gittings actually say anything nice about Thomas Hardy—about Hardy the man, I mean; for he shows a proper warmth about the novels and poems. I am probably exaggerating, but that is the impression it leaves. The words "fair-minded" spring to one's lips, for Robert Gittings is no hagiographer and does not mince words about Hardy's shortcomings. Hardy, he says, was timid and morbidly sensitive, he was secretive and devious, he was a sado-masochist and, for long, emotionally immature; he was, in addition, a snob, keeping his humble connections dark from his fashionable friends and eventually disowning them. The judgments are passed coolly and without animus and are not intended to make Hardy out a villain. They are truly "fair-minded", except that—and it *is* puzzling—there is nothing in the other pan of the scales.

I puzzle as to the reason for this. It could be, simply, that Hardy was not a very nice man. Only I feel that I would have liked him; though it is very true I would not wish to have been married to him. Going to the other extreme in explanation, it could be the old problem afflicting biographies of writers: that the activities we admire writers for are, in the nature of things, conducted unseen, so that, though the writers may be heroes or saints in their art, they will show up poorly against a St Francis or Garibaldi, whose activities we witness.

There is another general explanation one might invoke. Most men in the public eye devote their days and nights to concealing their faults; authors, on the other hand, spend their time writing about them. Who does not know that Dickens was a hypocrite and Proust a snob? Their biographers are rather severe on the sub-

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ject, but the tip was given them by Dickens and Proust themselves. Hardy was no exception: he wrote a comic novel, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, about a fashionable writer desperately concealing his (or rather her) humble social origins and another novel, *The Well-Beloved*, about a man so incorrigibly immature that he falls in love with the same face through three generations. Admittedly they are not very good novels; but in superior novels, such as *The Return of the Native* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he studies, in Clym Yeobright and Angel Clare, deleterious tendencies that he found in his own heart, and in doing so he made them public property.

STILL, LET US TURN from general explanations to the specific criticisms that Robert Gittings makes of Hardy as a man. The one that interests me is about his attitude to his social origins. The facts, some of them brought to light for the first time by Robert Gittings, are extraordinarily interesting. When Hardy was first taken up by London literary society he felt, like his own Ethelberta, that he was nursing a secret it was dangerous to reveal. When visiting Leslie Stephen in Kensington he did not tell him that his mother had been a cook and had been brought up on parish relief, nor that his uncle John was an ordinary labourer, nor that, a few years before, he himself had been courting a lady's maid, his cousin Martha Sparks, in a nearby Kensington house and had been familiar with life below stairs. Even to his wife he probably never told these things, and he was careful to omit them, like so many other facts, from the autobiography he ghosted. It appears, too, that he may have been engaged to Tryphena Sparks and have deserted her for Emma Gifford partly for reasons of social ambition. With success, marriage, and the move to Max Gate, he tended to cut himself off from his Dorset relations. The Hardys, making their way to church at Turnworth, would

bicycle stiffly through the main street [of Puddletown] looking neither to right nor to left. Cottage doors were full of his close relations, the Hands, the Antells, and visiting Sparkses; but Hardy neither gave nor acknowledged greetings as he pedalled resolutely on with Emma.

Gittings's tone is somewhat critical here. And if I dare interpret his general view, it seems to be that social ambition did a certain harm both to Hardy's work and to his personal life. He would have done well to recognise, what the *Times* reviewer of *Far From The Madding Crowd* saw: that—to use Gittings's words—Hardy was “an essentially working-class author, of exceptional

talent, best employed with settings and people he understood at first hand.” That phrase “essentially working-class author”: I am not sure about it. “Essentially working-class”: yes, perhaps Hardy was and remained that, if you lay a lot of weight on “essentially.” But a “working-class author”? That seems to entail the idea of a working-class literature, and there was no such thing in the 19th century, or if there was Hardy didn't belong to it. It seems to be inescapable that, in that century, to become an author—or anyway the sort of author that Hardy was—one had to become a “gentleman.” Literature was then, and to some extent still is, inextricably bound up with middle-class manners and aspirations.

Robert Gittings would perhaps not disagree and merely regrets Hardy's manner of making himself a “gentleman.” But I think he slightly misinterprets the emotion that Hardy, as a returned native, brought to the rural scene. He depicts Hardy's happiness thus during the writing of *Far From The Madding Crowd*:

Hardy had returned, just like some man in a D. H. Lawrence story, to the world of his mother, a fortress against the vagaries of women. . . . As winter deepened, the hearth grew increasingly a place for folk-lore, and the legends of Melbury Osmond flowered in full superstition.

. . . he needed, as he said to Stephen in the later stages of the book, to be living on or near the spot that he was writing about. . . . Most of all he needed, in the marrow of his being, the reassurance of the familiar, the scenes and the people of his boyhood home, mother, father, brother, sisters, and the Hardy cousins down the road. . . .

Being so close to his originals in real life, Hardy had no need of literary models.

This need to live among the very scenes that he was writing about goes against one's expectations of writers, who as a rule function more like Ibsen or Joyce, who needed to put many geographic miles between themselves and the Norway or Dublin of their imagining. Nostalgia, one thought, works best at a distance. And, more generally, art proceeds by contraries, and it is because one is not something, or is no longer something, that one can shape it as art. Well, I'm inclined to think the law holds, and the fact that Hardy liked to be among the scenes he was describing is the measure of how irremediably he felt himself no longer a part of them. The whole tone of his “Wessex” novels is that of loss and distance, a loss he had suffered and a distance he had travelled; and the nearer to the evidence, the more acutely he experienced the distance. It helped him to focus it; just as, at the death of Emma, he needed to revisit the scenes of his past romance to register its full and aching pastness. Loss was always his strongest inspiration:

loss of faith, loss of physical beauty, loss of instinctive and unselfconscious life. It began in personal feeling, but he extended it to take in historical change, like the break-up of agricultural England, and even cosmic change, the expulsion from an Eden of "nescience":

*A time there was—as one may guess
And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell—
Before the birth of consciousness,
When all went well*

(“Before Life And After”)

His “Wessex” was of incalculable importance for England and attached a note of poignancy and loss to the whole idea of the English countryside. In lesser writers the emotion turned narcissistic, so that for Georgian poets at the outbreak of the war—see Masefield’s “August, 1914”—Hardy’s England was a thing too precious and rare and perishable for foreigners to understand.

THE VERY NATURE of Hardy’s writing, that strict science of natural appearances and endless inventiveness in picturesque effects, emphasises, in a way, his separateness from the rustic; it stamps him as some kind of aesthete and as closer to a Ruskin or a Hopkins than to George Eliot. However, there is a more obvious

token of this sense of separateness: I mean his treatment of his rustic “chorus.” Critics speak a little vaguely about this rustic chorus as “Shakespearean”, or, sometimes, as “overdone.” What actually he is up to with it is really very odd, and, above all, it makes his social standpoint plain. His rustics are not just held at arm’s length but removed to the other end of the universe. He is working several kinds of joke in them. He sometimes makes them pantomimic and slow-witted in a traditional way; but the main and most interesting joke is about the overturning of middle-class conventions: for instance the middle-class convention that “spiritual” values are more important than material ones, or that it is not good manners to make personal remarks. Thus the rustics pay due honour to social position and superiority, but not at all on “spiritual” grounds. A nice amoral paradox thus develops:

“Oh, ’tis true enough. I knowed the man and woman both well. Levi Everdene—that was the man’s name, sure. ‘Man’, saith I in my hurry, but he were of a higher circle of life than that—’a was a gentleman-tailor really, worth scores of pounds. And he became a very celebrated bankrupt two or three times.”

“Oh, I thought he was quite a common man!” said Joseph.

“O no, no! That man failed for heaps of money; hundreds in gold and silver.”

(*Far From The Madding Crowd*, chapter 8)

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A similar paradox develops about plain speaking. Since there is no escape from appalling plain speaking in rustic society, the victims comfort themselves that their defects (in Christopher Cattle's case, in *The Return of the Native*, that of being so hideous and poor-spirited no woman will ever look at him) must, since everyone treats them as simple fact, be somehow neutral and not a matter for shame—perhaps even a kind of distinction. There is a scene which draws on this joke in *Far From The Madding Crowd*, where the bashful and religious-minded Joseph Poorgrass gets drunk and lachrymose. Gabriel Oak says: "I wish you'd show yourself a man of spirit, and not sit whining there." "Show myself a man of spirit?" protests Poorgrass.

"... Ah, well! let me take the name of drunkard humbly—let me be a man of contrite knees—let it be! I know that I always do say 'Please God' afore I do anything, from my getting up to my going down of the same, and I be willing to take as much disgrace as there is in that holy act. Hah, yes!... But not a man of spirit? Have I ever allowed the toe of pride to be lifted against my hinder parts without groaning manfully that I question the right to do so? I inquire that query boldly?"
 "We can't say that you have, Hero Poorgrass", admitted Jan.

These comic conceptions are wonderfully funny and charming, but nothing could less suggest kinship with the rustics on the author's part. Listen to this: even funnier to my mind, and even more a matter of pure liberated verbal fantasy. It is not so much Shakespearean as Furbankian or Lewis Carrollian, and it does not in the least recall "A Rural Painting of the Dutch School":

"A multiplying eye is a very bad thing", said Mark Clark.

"It always comes on when I have been in a public-house a little time", said Joseph Poorgrass meekly. "Yes; I see two of every sort, as if I were some holy man living in the times of King Noah and entering the ark... Y-y-y-yes," he added, becoming much affected by the picture of himself as a person thrown away, and shedding tears; "I feel too good for England: I ought to have lived in Genesis by rights, like the other men of sacrifice, and then I shouldn't have b-b-been called a d-d-drunkard in such a way."

MY POINT is that to have placed a gulf, and to recognise that gulf, between himself and his social origins was integral to the making of Hardy as a writer. Robert Gittings, I feel, does not give quite enough scale and weight to what Hardy went through to become an artist. Of course, one doesn't look for colourful "experiences", incest, illegitimate children and the like; and one of the excellent aspects of Gittings's book is his careful scotching of such *Providence and Mr Hardy* fantasies. Still, great art does not come out of

nothing. Robert Gittings seems to have no better explanation of Hardy's first great achievement in *Far From the Madding Crowd* than that, "Being so close to his originals in real life, Hardy had no need of literary models": as if art were no more than copying what you see. Taking this narrow view of art, Gittings is forced into holding that *Far From The Madding Crowd*, fine as it is, is after all rather a tame production: "*Far From The Madding Crowd*, for all its deeper assurance of style, was something of the mixture as before which Stephen had seemed to suggest he wanted." It needed some real life tragedy, viz. the suicide of his friend Horace Moule—to make Hardy an author to be reckoned with. Thus the "experience" theory raises its head after all, and rather distortingly to my mind. For I would consider *Far From The Madding Crowd* an absolutely central work in Hardy's oeuvre. There is a unity in that sequence of "Wessex" novels which runs from *Far From The Madding Crowd* to *The Woodlanders*; they strike one as having been conceived as a whole, exploring several rural industries and landscapes in turn with something of a Balzacian or Zola-esque system-making; and the last of the sequence, *The Woodlanders*, very closely resembles the first.

Biography tends to be a distraction here. And as for Horace Moule, one feels his tragedy must be significant; but for the life of me I cannot follow Gittings's theory that he was the model for Jude. After all, Moule, the son of a well-to-do vicar, got not only to Oxford but to Cambridge as well, winning the Hulsean prize and becoming a reviewer on a distinguished literary journal: not surely a tragedy of "obscurity" and lack of opportunity? Admittedly he never took a degree, and had a drink-problem; and Robert Gittings brings forward some remarkably interesting facts about him, especially that he had an illegitimate child by a Dorset girl, and this child was brought up in Australia and eventually hanged! Thus, certainly, the image of "Father Time" in *Jude* begins to compose itself before us.

ROBERT GITTINGS'S BOOK takes impetus, R in part, from impatience with the *Life* which Hardy ghosted through his second wife. And this is understandable; for if you are looking for the truth about Hardy's private life, you won't find it there, in that repository of evasions, reticences and lies. He is not alone in disliking the *Life*. All the same, when he speaks of its "humorless and colourless pages", which "almost always lack life, except where some flash of country anecdote or incident suddenly enlivens them", I feel once again that "fair-minded"

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frostiness in his tone towards Hardy. For myself, I find the *Life* a magnificent book, a book one can hunt about in endlessly, always finding some moving oddity or "inscape" of genius. How can one resist this?

He was also in London a part of the month, where he saw "what is called sunshine up here—a red-hot bullet hanging in a livid atmosphere—reflected from window-panes in the form of bleared copper eyes, and inflaming the sheets of plate-glass with smears of gory light. A drab snow mingled itself with liquid horsedung, and in the river puddings of ice moved slowly on. The steamers were moored, with snow on their gangways. A captain in sad solitude, smoked his pipe against the bulkhead of the cabin stairs. The lack of traffic made the water like a stream through a deserted metropolis. In the City George Peabody sat comfortably in his easy chair, with snow on the folds of his ample waistcoat, the top of his bare head, and shoulders, and knees."

Or this:

May 30 [1877]. Walking to Marnhull. The prime of bird-singing. The thrushes and blackbirds are the

most prominent,—pleading earnestly rather than singing, and with such modulation that you seem to see their little tongues curl inside their bills in their emphasis. A bullfinch sings from a tree with a metallic sweetness piercing as a fife. Further on I came to a hideous carcass of a house in a green landscape, like a skull on a table of dessert.

IT IS TRUE, most that is good in the book is in these diary-entries, written many years before. But Hardy's diary, though it tells you little enough about his life, tells you much about his sensibility. One studies it as one would study a Turner sketchbook, and with as much admiration. Robert Gittings complains, not unreasonably, that when Hardy should be telling us about his visit (probably searing) to Emma's father near Bodmin, he fobs us off with "a pointless anecdote about another elderly friend of Emma, Miss d'Arville, and her canary, which fainted whenever a cat came into the room, or even when it was showed the picture of a cat." The truth is, I find, I even like the stories about fainting canaries, and that I can't exactly justify.

A Modest Movement

Imagism—By JOHN FULLER

ANYONE WITH AN INTEREST in the poetry of this century has to come to terms with Imagism: the ripples of disturbance still widen and lap, though the original stone was a small one. J. B. Harmer's brief, arising out of a doctoral thesis, was to examine the stone and not the ripples. One can't help but regret this, for given the inaccessibility of American studies of the subject by Glenn Hughes and Stanley Coffman, his is really the first full-length treatment of Imagism to come our way.¹ We might have expected at this date a very large and full perspective. This we do not get.

Historically, Imagism seems absurdly provincial, but its aims were at the centre of the whole modernist programme for poetry, just as Ezra Pound, its eventual spokesman, acted as a catalyst in the developing careers of so many modern writers. Harmer traces patiently the three stages of the movement: the 1909 meetings of the Poet's Club, largely under the influence of T. E. Hulme; the period of Pound's ascendancy between 1912 and 1914; and the take-over by Amy Lowell, which lasted until 1917. The account is

soundly organised, with well-researched and suggestive detail. Chapter 1: the woeful state of poetry at the time. Chapter 2: a brief history of the related movements. Chapter 3: an examination of the work of the poets involved, with liberal quotation. Chapter 4: various influences, French, Japanese, Greek. Chapter 5: an examination of theories lying behind the movement. Chapter 6: a summary of the movement's importance and influence.

The four central chapters, containing the fruits of his research, are full of interest. Our understanding of the aims of the Imagists (economy of language, *vers libre*, direct presentation of things) is steadily and gradually established as we follow the ins-and-outs of their actual relationships. Thus subtly linked, principle and performance seem not so far apart as the mediocrity of the poetry in itself would suggest. Deeply involved in a literary ambience which owes little to talent and a great deal to historical accident, Harmer manages to sound sensibly important and judicious in, for instance, his assertion of the unjust neglect of Seosamh MacCathmhaoil or his demonstration of Pound and Eliot borrowing some salient critical notions from Edward Storer. Unfulfilled ambitions are

¹ *Victory in Limbo: A History of Imagism 1908-1917*. By J. B. HARMER. Secker & Warburg, £6.