Hardy's "Lesser Novels"

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6. HARDY'S "LESSER NOVELS"


"Lesser novels" is Taylor's term for seven works which are often regarded as valleys separating Thomas Hardy's impressive achievements in prose fiction. Few students of Hardy would have trouble listing them, so often is the boundary drawn between Hardy's major and minor novels. Yet, as Taylor convincingly argues, this boundary misleads: the seven should be regarded as "different rather than inferior" and thus should demonstrate "the obvious homology of all his novels." Even The Hand of Ethelberta can be "recognised as the work of a great writer."

On first impression, with its one chapter per novel format, the book may look like a slight, dutiful survey of its subject. A glance into the Introduction, however, shows that the author's approach is more ambitious, his subject more comprehensive. The bedrock on which the study rests is Taylor's conviction of the "interpenetrating unities" of all Hardy's fiction. Rather than conceding the minority or eccentricity of, say, Desperate Remedies or A Pair of Blue Eyes, and being content to analyze the novels, as has so often been done, as aberrations, Taylor stresses the place each has in the Hardy canon. By so doing, he is able to show the links which connect each of the lesser novels not only with its immediate predecessors but with key thematic concerns and formal conventions characteristic of Hardy's greater novels.

This summary suggests a major virtue of this book: its well-balanced and sensitive critical approach. At some point in his book's evolution, Taylor may have been tempted to adopt either the optics of one of the newer critical schools or a startling new thesis—either way, to suggest that these works had not previously been seen in such a light. This approach would, however, have been foreign to his purpose. His own approach can be called developmental: tracing the growth of Hardy's genius as development or process, one significantly influenced by the composition, publication and reception of these seven novels.

His analysis of Desperate Remedies, while it takes the novel's weaknesses into account, stresses how the "idiosyncratic impress of Hardy's mind is . . . felt in this unusual first novel." Written to please Alexander Macmillan, and yet finally rejected by him, the novel was probably damaged by "all the well-meant advice" that its author received. As he diagnoses the novel's weakness, while Hardy chose the sensation novel form, his characters "do not simply conform to their linear functions but become beings of some psychological complexity, unusual but real. . . ." This created a major problem, however, for his characters' "realism seems sometimes at odds with the form and, conversely, the melodramatic framework tends to dissipate the effectiveness of their dramatic relationship." Flawed though it is, Desperate Remedies "establishes character typologies which run, without major variation, throughout Hardy's fourteen novels."

The discussion of The Well-Beloved is marred by undue emphasis on a theme heard in all his chapters: the influence of serial publication on the development of Hardy's art. His claim is explicit and perhaps excessive: "to the end his dealings with editors of serial publications, more than any other single factor outside his creative powers, directed the course of his career in prose fiction."
The difficulty such a thesis creates for Taylor is that, for proper development, he should concentrate on those novels written expressly for the editors of periodicals (that is, the serial versions) and ignore the later book editions, for in writing them Hardy was, one assumes, freed from any necessity of cutting and pasting to suit the sensibilities of hypersensitive Victorian editors. But because Taylor's analysis stresses Hardy's development and his response to criticism, he could not so limit himself. His claim, therefore, tends to throw the reader off the track so ably pursued in this and the other chapters—how this novel reveals important characteristics of Hardy's art. He shows how, in its prominent use of "the theme of pursuit of an impossible ideal," The Well-Beloved "dramatises a fundamental aspect of Hardy's tragic vision." Jocelyn differs from Hardy's similarly afflicted protagonists, however, by the degree of his self-knowledge. But though he recognizes his problem, he cannot master it. In limning Jocelyn, moreover, Hardy "frankly acknowledges an immutable facet of human nature and male psychology, thus posing an implicit challenge to marital conventions." In these and other respects, Taylor's analysis serves to restore The Well-Beloved to the Hardy canon. The novel emerges as an impressive experiment, "consistent with Hardy's ability to surprise throughout his career."

Readers of this book will be grateful to Taylor for assaying these lesser Hardy novels without feeling the need to make great claims for either their uniqueness or their greatness. Perhaps his greatest service is in arguing that they are indeed Hardy's offspring, that they bear "the family face" and that they are near and legitimate relatives of their more famous kinsmen.

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7. BURNE-JONES AND THE NINETIES


Undoubtedly many students of Edward Burne-Jones have already read Burne-Jones Talking with a great deal of pleasure. Those hitherto not particularly interested in Burne-Jones might be attracted simply because the book makes available one of the most unusual primary documents of the late Victorian period. It is a diary that records with meticulous detail conversations which took place in Burne-Jones' studio during the years 1894-98. The conversations were transcribed either from memory or from surreptitiously scribbled notes by Thomas J. Rooke, landscape painter, sometime copyist for Ruskin and longtime assistant to Burne-Jones. This unique document was used previously in two biographies of Burne-Jones, but for the first time we get a substantial portion of the text, with the additional bonus of helpful annotations. The record confirms our view of Burne-Jones as an endearing personality, and, so claims editor Mary Lago in her introduction, it corrects our mistaken notion that Burne-Jones was a romantic recluse by showing his knowledge of contemporary public issues. Almost lost in the shuffle is Rooke's own intriguing personality, unobtrusive, innocent yet sly, a miniature of his master's.

Granted, then, that a certain class of reader will derive value from the book, the question remains whether those interested primarily in the ELT period