THE HARDY REVIVAL, 1940-'50

If this sort of thing continues, no more novel writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at.

As far back as 1892 Hardy had recorded these words in his notebook after reading the attacks meted out to him in the reviews of *Tess*. A similar reception given to *Jude* so disgusted Hardy that he wrote no more novels, henceforth devoting his energies to poetry, which he had always regarded as far more important than fiction.

The period during which Hardy wrote his novels covers a stretch of nearly twenty-five years. Throughout this time and well after his last novel in 1897 numerous criticisms appeared in reviews, magazines and newspapers. But in spite of the numerous slating remarks and distressing accounts by critics from all quarters, the interest in the reading of Hardy's novels never waned.

Hardy was consistently undervalued by his contemporaries and even abused for writing books which did not fit in with their ideas. The main stumbling block for the Victorians was his 'pessimism', or rejection of the idea of providence. Unfortunately, this has remained an obstacle for some modern critics and readers as well.

because it is generally assumed that Hardy is a writer who invariably looks at the darker side of life.

Despite the general clamour against Hardy, came some very positive reviews after the publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Interest in Hardy was evident in France, Germany and America. A French reviewer praised the presentation of rural life, the rustic chorus, and the reality of the descriptions of nature, and predicted that Hardy will continue to command the respect of serious readers.

In England numerous honours came to Hardy in his late years and he accepted them with easy pleasure and grace. He began to be called "The Grand Old Man of English Letters."

The critical consensus, however, was that Hardy remained an 'essential victorian'. With others he was a traditional writer of tales while some declared him to be a modern. However, in spite of these conflicting approaches, one thing is certain - he had a large reading public.

Most victorian novelists first published their work as a weekly or monthly serial. After serialization their novels appeared in book form and found their way to the public libraries, where they reached another vast
group of readers. Quite often the final version was very different from the serial one; Hardy himself had to make several changes in his novels before they came out in book form. The advantage of this way of publishing books was that they reached a much wider public than the novels of Scott or Jane Austen had done. More readers meant more reviews and criticisms.

Hardy responded to many reviews by writing letters to editors defending or explaining his intentions, but on occasions he widely kept quiet, knowing that against gratuitous malice he had no defence. In the midst of these attacks together with his illness which was slow and painful, and the strained relations that existed between himself and his wife he tried to console himself with the reflection that "there is mercy in troubles coming in battalions" - "they neutralize each other"?2

The best criticism however, came only in 1940 with the publication of the Hardy Centennial number of The Southern Review. The reviewers and contributors of this number of the Southern Review paid intelligent tributes to a man who had suffered much neglect during his life time. The articles were written by select band of highly intelligent men who took Hardy with utmost seriousness and came forward with new insights into his works. In

short, the new insights were modern, illuminating and proved a turning point in Hardy criticism. The finest accounts came from critics like Donald Davidson, Morton Dauwen Zabel, W.H. Auden and Katherine Anne Porter. These essays set the pace for later accounts which helped to place Hardy among the very best of English novelists. The importance of this event in the development of Hardy criticism is great. It was in this decade that critics began to recognize how much Hardy had to say to the modern world. The contributors of *The Souther Review* began to move away from the usual assessment given him during his life. This chapter attempts an assessment of Hardy's importance in the 1940's beginning with the valuable insights that came with the Centennial number of *The Southern Review* (1940).

One of the first concerns here is whether Thomas Hardy was a traditionalist or modernist. Is it the supposedly changeless, traditional characters or the changeful, Promethean ones who constitute the norms in "Wessex"? The terminology, as most scholars will recognize, is that of Donald Davidson - from his 1940 essay "The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's Fiction" which appeared in *The Souther Review*.

Donald Davidson firmly establishes Hardy as a traditionalist and an almost timeless teller of tales,
and remarks that the most "literary" of the novel meaning the early novels are the weakest. Davidson in his essay further says:

He wrote as a ballad maker would write if a ballad maker were to have to write novels, or as a bardic or epic poet would write if faced with the necessity of performing in the quasi-lyrical but nonsignable strains of the nineteenth century and later. ³

Many of the peculiarities of the novels, perhaps even the fatalistic or pessimistic "meanings" so overstressed by academic critics, are also peculiarities of the old popular ballads. Davidson's argument is highly persuasive.

Davidson was against the opinion of earlier critics that Hardy was a 'folk author'. Although there are eccentricities of language in his poetry and prose, and a habitual reliance on tradition, nowhere, says Davidson, is there "the affection of archaism or the deliberate exploitation of archaism." ⁴ The old fashioned quality in Hardy is not in the obvious places, but lies deeper. It is in the habit of Hardy's mind rather than in "folklore" or the phenomena of language and style.

Therefore, Hardy wrote or tried to write, says Davidson, more or less as a modern - modern, for him


being late nineteenth century. The central theme of Davidson's thesis lies in the fact that the characteristic Hardy novel is conceived as a "told (or sung) story, or at least not as a literary story; that it is an extension in the form of a modern prose fiction, of a traditional ballad or an oral tale - a tale of the kind which Hardy reproduces with great skill in A Few Crusted Characters and less successfully in A Group of Noble Dames; but furthermore that this habit of mind is a rather unconscious art. The conscious side of his art manifests itself in two ways: first, he "works up" his Core of traditional or nonliterary narrative into a literary form; but, second he labours to establish, in his "Wessex" the kind of artistic climate and environment which will enable him to handle his traditional story with conviction - a world in which typical ballad heroes and heroines can flourish with a thoroughly rationalized "mythology" to sustain them.

Therefore says Davidson, Hardy's intricate plot and treatment of characters are associated with traditional fiction from ancient times. Action not description is always foremost; the event dominates, rather than motive, or psychology, or comment. There is absolutely no doubt, says Davidson, that Hardy has an evident fondness for

what might be called the "country story". They are essentially "balladistic" in nature.

Davidson points out in his essay some of the traditional 'ballad' qualities in Hardy's stories. There is the "faithful lover" of many a ballad in Gabriel Oak. He endures a kind of "testing" not far from the testings that ladies subjected their lovers to in romances and ballads; and he is also obviously the excellent lover of "low degree" whose affections are finally rewarded. Fanny, in the same novel, is a typical deserted maiden and her lover, Sergeant Troy, is the soldier of any number of later ballads.

About coincidence in the typical Hardy narrative Davidson says that the 'traditional story' has not the logic of modern literary fiction. He says: "the traditional story admits, and even cherishes, the improbable and unpredictable. The miraculous, or nearly miraculous, is what makes a story a story, in the old way." Unless a story has some strong and unusual features, he argues, it will hardly be told and will not be remembered. This approach is radically different from the earlier approaches which looked upon the improbable with absolute disfavour.

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Coincidence in Hardy's narratives says Davidson, "represents a conviction about the nature of story as such." What Davidson means is that with the writer striking a balance "between the uncommon and the ordinary" that which is uncommon or improbable is rationalized in terms of an unlikely but not impossible accident. Hardy's coincidences, with the absence of devils, demons, fairies and mermaids is a kind of substitution for supernaturalisms. So superstitions are used in the background of his narrative; coincidence, in the actual mechanics. Davidson finally concludes:

The supernatural, in Hardy, is allowed in the narrative, but in a subordinate position; the quasi-miraculous takes its place in the main position.

To the charge of pessimism by most of the insensitve and obtuse critics Davidson replied:

The charge of pessimism has about the same relevance as the charge of indelicacy which Hardy encountered when he first began to publish. An age of polite literature which had lost touch with the oral arts - except so far as they might survive in chit-chat, gossip and rë vive stories could not believe that an author who embodied in his serious stories the typical seductions, rapes, murders and lusty love-makings of the old tradition intended anything but a breach of decorum. Even today, I suppose, a group gathered for tea might be a little astonished if a respectable old gentleman in spats

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8 Ibid., p.18.
suddenly began to warble the outrageous ballad of Little Musgrave. But Hardy did not know he was being rough, and had no more notion than a ballad-maker of turning out a story to be either pessimistic or optimistic.

About the characters, Davidson states: "The most striking feature of Hardy's habit of mind, as traditional narrator, is in his creation of characters." The characters are fixed or "non-developing, that is, their fortunes may change, but they do not change with their fortunes. They have been modelled and have all the characteristics of all the "changelessness" of the figures of traditional narrative from-epic, saga, and romance to broadside balladry and its prose parallels. Hardy realized the value of the changeless character for as Davidson states "it has as much aesthetic richness as the changeful character." Hardy made great use of the changeless character but in doing so, says Davidson, he did not exploit "folk material" with the shallow assumption that the "folkishness" of the material is alone enough to dignify it. Therefore Hardy's stories are stories of human beings, not of peasants or moor dwellers as such. They are placed in a natural environment:

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10 Ibid., p.19.
11 Ibid., p.20.
a nature not very much despoiled or exploited, a town life neither wholly antique nor wholly modern, and the whole removed a little in time from the strictly contemporary, but not so far removed as to seem like a historical reconstruction. The antiquities the local colour, the folk customs are not decorative or merely picturesque; they are organic with the total scheme. They are no less essential and no more decorative than the occupations, ambitious and inter-relationships of the changeless characters. He accepts the assumptions of the society that he depicts, and neither apologizes for it more condescends to it.  

Davidson sees nature itself as being "unchangeable and inscrutable." Nearest to nature, and therefore most changeless, are the rustics. They have accepted nature as unchangeable and passively accommodate themselves to nature in the ordered ritual of their lives. But Davidson adds that there are a few deracinated rustics - Sergeant Troy for one - who do not conform, who have diverged "extravagantly" from the "changeless pattern." Such characters have taken on a vulgar form, they are nontraditional, they are aliens as they cannot conform to an age old tradition and this leads them away from Wessex. Says Davidson about these characters, "their rebellion is great enough to render their life courses inconstant and tragic." Davidson concludes:

\[13\] Ibid., p.21.
\[14\] Ibid., p.22.
In Hardy, tragedy does not arrive until changeless and changeful are engaged in bitter conflict.

In the same way Morton Dauwen Zabel argues that Hardy's modern tensions and ambiguities make his fiction a contemporary document. Zabel says:

He now appears to us as a realist developing toward allegory -- as an imaginative artist who brought the nineteenth century novel out of its slavery to fact and its dangerous reaction against popularity, and so prepared the way for some of the most original talents of a new time. He stands in a succession of novelists that include Melville, Emily Bronte and Hawthorne, that takes in James and Flaubert in the wider reach of their faculties, and that has arrived at the achievements of Joyce, Proust, Gide and Kafka.\(^\text{16}\)

The above extract appeared in an essay entitled "Hardy in Defense of His Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity." Earlier critics had deep reservations about his integrity as a writer. There were scandalous protests "of press and pulpit" to be conflicting elements that such prejudiced critics salvaged from his works. But Zabel cogently argues:

That Hardy's was a native and persistent order of genius, that he expressed it in style and drama which he made unmistakably his own; that his work carries the stamp of a theme and vision which have impressed a large area of art and experience in the last eighty years.\(^\text{17}\)


\(^{17}\)Ibid., p.24.
The central theme of Zabel's essay is "the radical quality" which Hardy insisted on disclaiming as a "philosophy" that is present in his prose and verse as in his personality and thought. It has been the subject of much debate and controversy, an impediment to critical thinking and because of the "discordence" that exists in his temperament, in his humanism and his response to human character. Yet Morton Zabel says that this is "the basic clue to his talent."\(^{18}\) Such contrasts and antitheses were present throughout modern fiction where:

Moral earnestness is scoffed by the scurrilities of cynicism, and where a sense of responsibility to the traditional dignities of the human spirit became so violently reproached by the squalor of modern society.\(^{19}\)

Satirists like Laforgue and Corbiere wrought these jarring collisions into a critical medium that had descended to Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Auden, and the modern satirists and realists.

Hardy, says Zabel, did not participate in these developments but must have inherited the "aesthetic disorder of the age, its unresolved antipathies, its sprawling appetite for life, and the instability that reflected the surrounding distraction."\(^{20}\) Hardy was aware throughout

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his life of the struggle in himself of a distressing opposition of faculties - of immediate personal sympathies and large intellectual ambitions. Further in the face of the critical hostility that surrounded him he struggled to formulate a defense of his talent and method. Thus he shaped a personal aesthetic for himself which contributed to the artistic progress of the modern novel and to the inter-relations of modern fiction and poetry. The craft of fiction said Zabel had not come to Hardy quickly for he took pains to come into some kind of conscious knowledge of his "aesthetic purposes". It is no wonder that critics of Hardy's day considered him an outsider to "art's higher mysteries". He refused to bow down to the critical faculty and based his faith "on a magical conception of man and nature." So says Morton Dawen Zabel:

Hardy's own anti-aesthetic committed him to a search for the timeless qualities of life and destiny, to a sense of history that shares little of the critical scrutiny of time and experience that was soon to become a major prepossession of the modern artist.  

Finally,

He divided his life between Wessex and the realities of his age. The two worlds gave him a dramatic stage on which to meet the conflicts of modern thought, to witness the tragic hostilities of life, to study the discord that marks the divided nature of man. But he mastered the "keeping" of

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his art and brought to it the force of his long intellectual and moral struggle.\(^{22}\)

In another account in the Hardy Centennial Number of *The Southern Review*, W.H. Auden stated, "I cannot write objectively about Thomas Hardy because I was once in love with him."\(^{23}\)

What Auden valued most in the novelist was his "hawk's vision", his way of looking to Auden had comforted him as an adolescent, and educated his vision as a human being. Auden writes:

To see the individual life related not only to the local/social life of its time but to the whole of human history life on the earth, the stars, gives one both humility and self-confidence. Far from such perspective the difference between the individual and society is so slight since both are so insignificant, that the latter ceases to appear as a formidable god with absolute rights, but rather as an equal, subject to the same laws of growth and decay and therefore one with whom reconciliation is possible.\(^{24}\)

In a final tribute to Hardy, Auden states:

He is dead, the world he knew has died too, and we have other roads to build, but his humility before nature, his sympathy for the suffering and the blind, and his sense of proportion are as necessary now as they ever were.\(^{25}\)


\(^{24}\)Ibid., p.140.

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p.142.
Hardy's works in his life time had been criticised particularly for their "incongruity". He was conscious of this hostility among critics, he never became thick-skinned even in his final apotheosis, to disregard it.

In the 1940 Centennial issue of *The Southern Review* appeared yet another of those merciless reports from a contributor. It read:

Only the disenchanted sophomore can be deeply impressed by Hardy's view of life. Although it was an outcome of the new scientific views, it now seems like a simple variant of super-naturalism ....... And although Hardy properly objected to treating his fiction as a "scientific system of philosophy" the trouble is that he often wrote as if it were. The scheme of his novels is typically all too rigid and diagrammatic, their argument all too formal and explicit ....... The serious objection, at any rate is not to his philosophy 'per se' the dismal generalizations he illogically induces from the extraordinary actions he invents. It is to his artistry, the inventions themselves. 26

This however is a most uncharacteristic response in this period of Hardy criticism. It is rather an absolute lack of response. Mr. E.Z. Woodward the Oxford historian is more representative in his interesting biography *Short Journey* (Faber, 1942) where he writes:

During my last year at school and my first two years at Oxford, the poems and novels of Thomas Hardy influenced my mind far more than the work any other English writer

... The book *Tess* moved me so deeply that I could not read more than a chapter at a time .... So I read on until I had come to the end of everything which Hardy had published, I have read these novels and poems over and over again. They are part of my life.27

Another great writer that contributed to the 1940 Thomas Hardy Centennial Issue of *The Southern Review* was Katherine Anne Porter. George Moore once said that Thomas Hardy wrote the worst prose of the nineteenth century. His temperament generally gets into and compensates for the doggedness of Hardy's prose structure and the heaviness with which he plans a major effect. The judgement of Katherine Anne Porter seems to be a fair one:

Who does not remember it? And in actual re-reading, what could be duller? What could be more labored than his introduction of the widow Yeobright at the heath fire among the dancers or more unconvincing than the fears of the timid boy that the assembly are literally raising the Devil? Except for this in my memory of that episode as in dozens of others in many of Hardy's novels, I have seen it, I was there. When I read it, it almost disappears from view and afterwards comes back phraseless, living in its sombre clearness, as Hardy meant it to do, I feel certain.28

It is here that we recall Havelock Ellis's remark that Hardy was without training as a literary artist:

"It is genius that carries him through."

Following the essays that came in *The Southern Review* was another valuable study: *Hardy the Novelist* by David Cecil (1943). This study originated from Clark lectures at Cambridge.

The first thing that David Cecil reflects on is Hardy's range. It was conditioned by the circumstances of his early life. It was an agricultural life where everyone, except the clergyman and the school master lived by the land. Says David Cecil:

> It was a life that had stability and dignity. It had its light relief too, home made traditional pleasures such as harvest celebrations, Christmas gaieties, parties where people danced and sang ballads and told stories. There was also the tragic aspects of life where lovers parted, a young man, in need of a livelihood, would leave the place to seek his fortune. Years later he would return to find his sweet heart married to another. In such a world confused and elemental, passions grew to obsessions.

Being a very sensitive boy Hardy responded precociously to experience and the life in which he grew up stamped itself deeply on his imagination. When in his forties had reached the peak of his creative development. In this way says David Cecil: "Nature, first of all, played a larger part in his books than in thos of any other English novelist." \(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\)David Cecil: *Hardy the Novelist*, London, Published by Constable and Co. Ltd., 1943, p.16.  
\(^{30}\)Ibid., p.16.
Further Cecil points out that the plots of Hardy's books were as much conditioned by his upbringing as were his setting and characters. His comedy, says Cecil is based on the genial, farcical, humorous aspects of village life. His tragedy depicts village tragedy composed "of the drama of broken love and wronged girls, the feuds and the hangings which filled his early memories."[3]

Local history extended the range of Hardy's vision of life. Around Dorchester he could not escape prehistoric burial mounds and fortifications; Maumbury Ring and the discoveries of excavators reminded him of the power, the pride, the reach of perished Rome; and aged country people still remembered defensive preparations against Napoleonic invasion. It is no wonder, said David Cecil, that Hardy's environment turned his imagination to the past. His books are resonant with echoes of an earlier age dealing with the contemporary world of his life as a child and in Tess and Jude the world of his mature years.

This world in its turn was closely linked with a more ancient history. And Wessex had played a large part in history. Cecil points out that Hardy was acutely sensitive to the picturesque appeal of the past. He was determined to preserve in his pages the memories of some

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traditional occupation now growing obsolete, like that of the redleman in *The Return of the Native*.

Cecil observes that if Hardy's range "is limited" in the first place this was due to the circumstances of his upbringing. It was further defined by his angle of vision. David Cecil continues, "Hardy's subject is human life ... He sees human beings less as individuals than as representatives of species, and in relation to the ultimate conditioning forces of their existence. His subject is not men but man. His theme is man's predicament in the universe."

Hardy's theme, says David Cecil, was a tragic one because tragic circumstances or rather man's helplessness is what struck his imagination most. The world as Hardy saw it was full of pain and disappointment and so he depicted pain and disappointment as outstanding characteristics of human existence. This disposition, says David Cecil of a "melancholy view" was confirmed and increased by the age in which Hardy lived.

Hardy's interpretation of the human situation says Cecil was one of a struggle between man and "an omnipotent and indifferent Fate." Man in Hardy's books ranged against "impersonal forces", the forces conditioning

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his fate. His characters are "puppets in the hands of Fate. Fate, not them, is ultimately responsible for their quarrels." It is no wonder that Hardy, as a rule, emphasises he fact that even those characters the world would call wicked are so much the creatures of circumstances that "they are far more to be pitied than to be blamed."

David Cecil further points out that Hardy's greatest strength lay in his ability to make us "see". For "it is largely by his visualising power that he communicates his vision of experience." His vision of nature, for instance, is the most characteristic manifestation of his creative power, and it dominates his scene. Says Cecil:

Nature was to him the emblem of those impersonal forces of Fate with whom he presents mankind as in conflict.

Hardy's creative power showed itself in his characters. According to David Cecil "Hardy's range of character is limited." Cecil believed this because he felt that Hardy always conceived man in relation to ultimate human

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34 David Cecil: *Hardy the Novelist*, p. 62.
destiny, and in such a relation only certain qualities strike him as significant. Further, Cecil felt that Hardy did not have the power to conceive character very seriously. He points out that Hardy's memorable characters "have a family likeness." For example, there is the staunch self-less, tender-hearted hero - Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterborne, Diggory Venn. There is the dashing, fickle breaker of hearts - Troy, Wildeve; there is the patient, devoted, forgiving woman - Tess and Elizabeth-Jane to mention just two. However, we recognize them because we get to know their voices and tricks of speech. Their inner life is left to our imagination, so that if their speech does not reveal their individuality, "We never get to it". Cecil concludes that even though Hardy's range of character was limited he was a master when portraying a Wessex nature. Such figures, Cecil says, are no "wax dolls" but figures of solid flesh and blood. Giles and Fancy, Gabriel and Bathsheba, "are recognizable human English people, who can eat and drink and take their clothes off, and be irritable and foolish and excited."\(^{38}\)

This essay in criticism is significant. Though it might be thought that nothing new was to be said about Hardy's genius, Lord David Cecil has said much that is memorable, much that has not hitherto been said so well. It was a notable tribute to a novelist whose genius still

remains the subject of critical speculation.

Hardy criticism since 1934 has passed through several phases. To his contemporaries, as Edmund Blunden ably demonstrates in his book on Hardy in the English Men of Letters Series, he was just another Victorian novelist. They were insensitive to the glimpses of pastoral England his novels afford, and they had enough good models current in fiction to recognize how awkward his style was and how limited his range of characterization. One can sympathize with the Saturday Review which complained of Tess that "few people would deny the terrible dreariness of this tale, which, except during a few hours spent with the cows, has not a gleam of sunshine anywhere."

One sees what is meant about the gratuitous nature of the tragic action, and feels sorry for the simplification of the dairy-idyll passages to "a few hours spent among the cows," when so much since has been written rapturously about the novel largely on the strength of those descriptions.

Our next critic is Edmund Blunden whose study is an index of the 1940's judgement. He is extremely cautious about making high claims, confines himself to countering adverse criticism of the less radical kind, and devotes a large proportion of his book to extracts

from the contemporary views. While conveying the peculiarities of Hardy's character as it appeared in old age, with some interesting reminiscences by men of letters of the impression his personality made on them, he does not give us the essential anecdotes and reminiscences about Hardy's youth which provide a clue in his morbid sensitiveness to suffering or even the appearance of it in nature (such as his weeping at seeing the leaves fall). Perhaps he wished to avoid overlapping with Mrs. Hardy's *Early Life and Later Life of Thomas Hardy*, which remains indispensable, although written as Q.D. Leavis states 'in the most unfortunate style of standard biography.' Nobody tells us the facts which are only vaguely known, about his emotional history and its reactions on his writings - for instance the estrangement from his first wife which produced the attacks on marriage, and the marriage laws in his writings at that time - *Jude*, The Woodlanders. The really useful critical biography of Hardy had not yet been written. But in a quiet way and leaving the reader to read between the lines, Blunden did go some way towards producing it.

Blunden had the same view as David Cecil that "Hardy's country world was by far his greatest education." When at school, he was a solitary and youthful boy, who enjoyed taking the daily walk from Bockhampton to Dorchester alone. These interesting walks both by daylight and darkness,

left him with a store of memories. During these years, his attachment to his native surroundings grew deep. Blunden puts the point eloquently when he says that Hardy felt and reasoned about man-kind by a particular apprehension of "local hearts and heads." His absolutes were conjectured first and last from a profound submission to the diurnal visible microcosm of Wessex.

Blunden points out in his account that even though Hardy had given up architecture as a profession it stayed with him, in another way for life. The training he had undergone meant:

An additional rightness in his observation as a general habit which was so valuable a resource in his novels and his other writings; the singularities and visible strange histories of ancient buildings impressed on him still young, the analogous unexpectedness and incongruity of the fabric of human affairs.

In short, his historical sense was assisted by his architectural knowledge.

Blunden emphasises the fact that Hardy took great pleasure in writing The Trumpet Major, for it originated in local history and topography which he cherished. The novel pleased most of the reviewers, and drew from the Athenaeum the compliment, "Mr Hardy seems to be in the

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42 Ibid., p.35.
way to do for rural life what Dickens did for that of the town." This remarkable interest in rural affairs and village communities says Blunden was stirring in England at the time when Hardy was forming his series of Wessex novels, and it touched him deeply.

One of the finest tributes made to Hardy during the war years was this:

Amidst all the tempest and upheaval, the appearances of doom and things past prophecy, Hardy's works had set up a steady rule or inviolable standard of English qualities not unworthy of the comparison with Shakespearian embodyings of those which had been made often enough in spite of all the attacks on *Tess* or *Jude*.\(^{43}\)

Blunden points out that the use of "odd vocabulary" "unhappy construction," long and ingenious passages given to characters in their conversation accounts for some of the faults in Hardy's novels. Further, he adds, that the adorning of pages with scriptural references was of no particular help to any reader.

I think Hardy's familiarity with the Bible probably did more to enlarge his historical sense than any other literature. Biblical echoes are legion in Hardy's fiction, and where they refer to well-known events and figures (Cain and Job, for example) they still have a universalising effect.

Hardy achieved a considerable degree of universality through his use of classical references from literature as well. He drew Wessex parallels from the old Testament stories. Hardy's works are strewn with literary quotations and allusions from many sources, ancient and contemporary, English and foreign, as for example, those from Shakespeare; the "Anguish that is sharper than a serpent's tooth" links the Marchioness of Stonehenge with Lear; "his nature to extenuate nothing", Henchard with the noble bearing of Othello in adversity; "the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing", Tess and The Rape of Lucrece. A similar but more extended universalising effect is obtained by Hardy's association of his tempters with Goethe's Mephistopheles or Milton's Satan.

Therefore, Blunden's assessment of Hardy that his classical references were out of place is the only weakness in what may be called a very successful analysis. Edmund Blunden is one of the earliest critics to see the value of Hardy and the important contribution made to the literary world by a man who had been considered for over half a century as one of the moving forces of his age. He adds, "It is hard to imagine a time when no one will be wanting to meet Tess, there where she stands not so much for her personal tragedy as for the English country girl."44 Then again he says,

As readers move away from their own affairs they will not help but admire Hardy .......
His witness is true, but such truth is difficult and unusual. Then besides these intensely patient and strongly living studies in the open (the novels abound in them) Hardy in his right road brings us those portraits of human worth and integrity which cannot soon fail to inspire the thoughtful.

Albert J. Guerard is the next important critic of this period. In a book entitled *Thomas Hardy*, we across a brilliant critical study where the author breaks sharply with the traditional approach to Hardy and sees him, not as a ponderous old-school philosopher, but as a great storyteller who dramatized the destructiveness, the drift, and the absurdity of life.

At the very start of his essay, Guerard refuses to accept the view of critics like Lascelles Abercrombie that Hardy was a great "craftsman." Rather he says:

We must begin by recognizing that Hardy was pre-eminently a traditional teller of tales, and a great poet who stumbled upon the art of fiction and practised it very waywardly.

Guerard called for a revaluation of Hardy's works because he believed that critics from Lionel Johnson (1895) to Lord Cecil (1946) belonged to a "generation" which was essentially victorian. Guerard saw as totally absurd the "realist" concept of fiction and the over-rated "Franciscan

tenderness in regard to children, animals, labourers, the poor, the mad, the insulted and injured." Guerard on the other hand affirmed that the critics of his "generation" were in fact attracted by much that made the post-Victorian realist uneasy:

The inventiveness and improbability, the symbolic use of reappearance and coincidence, the wanderings of a macabre imagination the suggestions of supernatural agency; the frank acknowledgement that love is basically sexual and marriage usually unhappy the demons of plot irony and myth. And we are repelled or left indifferent by what charmed that earlier generation the regionalists 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; the pretensions meditation on Egdon Heath; the discernible architecture of the novels and the paraphrasable metaphysic the Franciscan tenderness and sympathy — and, I'm afraid, the finally unqualified faith in the goodness of a humanity more sinned against than sinning.\footnote{Albert J. Guerard: \textit{Op.cit.}, p.6.}

Guerard further explains that Hardy was "no spiritual historian of the nature of Arnold trying to reconcile both the spiritual and scientific attitudes towards life." Hardy did not keep a careful finger on the changing pulse of his age. He was essentially "a story-teller", and his attitude toward many problems was aesthetic, that is "his pessimism was genuine enough, of course, but it was to a degree cultivated as artistically useful.

Guerard sums up Hardy's attitudes thus:
One of Hardy's great "subjects" was of course the sad passing of the stable rural life, the decay of old customs and of local traditions, the death of ghost stories and the death of village choirs.48

As "novelist and poet of Wessex", the decay of old customs was more significant to Hardy than the amelioration of the labourers lot; the changes were the ones which concerned him. Hardy thus looked on the problems of Dorset and Wessex "as new material for his vision and drama, he distorted actuality to achieve a kind of truth."49 He was a realist within a world he had reshaped to his vision and whose joys and sorrows he had quite deliberately heightened. Therefore, the dialogue of his characters was no more realistic than that of Shakespeare's. It was Hardy who spoke rather than the free citizen of Dorchester. Hardy's ideal society would be accessible to new ideas and would permit freedom to live and love, but it would simultaneously resist the passing of old customs and memories. In short, Hardy reshaped Dorset to his vision of Wessex. By the time he wrote Jude the Obscure, "Hardy left his idealized Wessex for the Harsh realities and moral confusion of the modern world. Curiously enough, Hardy began and ended his career as a novelist with what were frankly problem novels."50

Albert J Guerard gives us Hardy's attitude as a "thinker" in the change over to Jude:

49 Ibid., p.19.
50 Ibid., p.31.
Just as the Wessex novels leave an idealized impression of an ancient and stable world rather than an accurate almanac of Dorset so Jude the Obscure leaves a dominant and in a sense truthful impression of the world in which we live.

The most important factor that helped Hardy to develop a style was the "conflicting impulses" that prompted and impelled the novelist as a "story teller" and "conscious artist" to develop a fairly coherent body of work. Guerard talks about the realist and anti-realist impulses in Hardy and says:

Hardy was primarily a teller of tales longing both to create life rather than merely record it and to hold the reader enthralled. He was also to some degree a psychologist, though impelled less by curiosity than sympathy. He was certainly at times a realist in the several senses of the word. He wanted to describe ordinary human beings. He wanted to speculate on their dilemmas rationally and even schematically, and he wanted to record his pious memory of the material universe, of 'things' touched and tasted and seen. As an artist he wanted to construct shapely forms which had their own intrinsic beauty. Finally he wanted to be more than a realist. He wanted to escape the banality of exact observation and to express his particular awareness of the grotesque, the occult and the strange. He was determined to see a ghost.

Albert Guerard refers to his account of Thomas Hardy as a "revaluation" of the approach of "the earlier generation" of critics whom he called "post-Victorian." The

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52 Ibid., pp.47-48.
earlier generation assumed that the novel should provide an accurate reflection of every-day experience. Guerard said "It assumed that realism was the proper medium of fiction - and that to see a preponderance of evil and brute chance in life was to be unrealistic." Hardy, says Guerard, had always wanted to be a realist, he wanted to remain faithful to reason, to ordinary experience, to things. But on the other hand he wanted to see and create beyond them. His determination to transcend ordinary realism is the one thing that interested him.

In short, it was Hardy's realism which appealed to the "post-Victorian" critics whereas his anti-realism was what caught Guerard's attention. Guerard explained Hardy's anti-realism as an attempt to avoid the sterility of mere observation. Hardy was an anti-realist "on aesthetic grounds." As an anti-realist, Hardy had all those romantic qualities of a "a popular teller of tales." His anti-realism was more often the natural expression of a particular temperament and a great dramatic gift. His anti-realistic attitude shows Hardy not as a ponderous old-school philosopher, but as a great story teller who recognized only the natural."  

54 Ibid., p.84.  
55 Ibid., p.99.
Further Albert J. Guerard suggests that much is lost through excessive interest in Hardy's philosophy. "Academic schematizing ... has ... fastened on certain structural and didactic aspects of the major Wessex novels to the neglect of much else which remains readable and can even be useful to the novelist writing today." One should not, Guerard continues, "reduce ... a novel's meaning to some philosophy of life ... theorize oneself quite away from the living complex of the work of art, and the impression it actually makes." 56 Hardy would have welcomed Guerard's approach. Several times Hardy denied that he was advancing any general theory of things, and the word "impression" was his own favourite term for whatever sense of life his novels convey.

About Hardy's characterisation, Guerard says that "Hardy still seems a very gifted creator of personality, an occasionally gifted creator of character -- and, as a rule, a singularly successful analyst of "subtleties." 57 In "The Science of Fiction", Hardy says that what a novelist requires above all is:

A quick perception of the more ethereal characteristics of humanity, a sympathetic appreciation of life in all its manifestations and an accurate delineation of human nature. 58

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57 A.J. Guerard: Thomas Hardy, p.100.
58 Harold Orel: Hardy's Personal Writings, Univ. of Kansas, 1966, p.137.
Until that time Guerard came forward with his criticism, critics had not acknowledged that Hardy's psychological insight, subtlety and complexity was much greater, and closer to twentieth century psychological apprehensions. But though critics have paid passing tribute to this aspect of his fiction, sometimes even using the term "Freudian", no one had sufficiently examined this in detail. This is rather surprising in view of the central importance of character in novels and of Hardy's own emphasis on this "centrality" as cited above.

It is not altogether surprising that throughout his novels there is much that is closer to Freud and later psychological discoveries. But asks Guerard, "Has the critic any right to expect Freudian subtleties from a novelist writing between 1868 and 1894?" Hardy's characterisation is based on the principle of "instinctive understanding", a term used by psychologists when they speak of literary characterization. It further refers to findings conscious or subconscious not based on formal experiment and analysis. Guerard sums up Hardy's approach thus, "His psychological curiosity was melodramatic, the curiosity of a toiler of tales."

Guerard believes that Hardy's power to dramatize the personality and temperament of women was indeed extraordinary, but about his men "he presents fewer interesting

59 A.J. Guerard: Thomas Hardy, p.105.
men than almost any important novelist." Guerard divides Hardy's men into two groups. There seems to be, says Guerard a rarity of fairly normal men. The second category comprises those who do seem normally aggressive, or of normal sexuality. They are "either grotesquely unreal in other respects, or are broadly conceived as selfish rakes." as are Sergeant Troy, Wildeve, Bob Loveday and Dr. Fitzpiers. Guerard points out the fact that Hardy's men are inadequate as human beings and even more inadequate as fictional creations. However, he believes that Hardy's great gift for conveying living personality reveals itself rather in his portraits of rustics and of women.

Guerard speaks of Hardy's rustics thus:

The true Hardy rustic is of 'personality' all compact of gestures, turns of phrase, humors and deformities. They are the backbone of the community in and about Weatherbury and Egdon. Self-deprecation - frank obstinate, humorous, and sometimes proud -- is the great distinguishing characteristic of Hardy's rustics.

It is perhaps significant that the women in particular are seen as objects - fascinating, incomprehensible strange. Guerard says:

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60 A.J. Guerard: Thomas Hardy, p.157.
61 Ibid., p.114.
62 Ibid., p.122.
Few novelists English or Continental have such a gallery of charming impulsive and dangerously contradictory women to their credit. Hardy was certainly the greatest dramatist of female character and temperament in a half century almost monopolized by female novelists. He was the recorder of such psychic difficulties as Sue's, the creator of rounded characters as different as Eustacia Vye and Tess - and cynical theorist 'de nature feminae'.

The women, inspite of their perverse absurdities, are always, says Guerard, "more plausible than the men." Hardy's was a world of young women and girls, but even the elder women hovering in the background of his fiction are convincing and individualized. Hardy's women alive and very few of them are wholly uninteresting. Perhaps, says, Guerard: "Hardy offers only two men of more than average interest and vitality: Michael Henchard and Jude Fawley.

Guerard concludes that Hardy was a great popular novelist and not a great artist. The flaws and weaknesses in Hardy he attributes to the novelists' tendency to schematize and oversimplify dilemmas. Although he showed an aesthetic understanding of agricultural Dorset, he showed prior to _Jude the Obscure_, little understanding of the moral and social condition of the late nineteenth century. His power to dramatize the personality and temperament of women was indeed extraordinary, but he presented fewer

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interesting men than almost any important novelist. Guerard's final comments on his style is that he "is abnormally relaxed and diffused."

Guerard says that his appeal rests on the fact that:

Hardy was a great story teller. He excelled in the understanding of the plight of ordinary, simple and well-meaning persons, subjected to the extraordinary complex, and seemingly malign circumstances of life. Hardy was given to a certainty excessive charity in dealing with his villains. Sergeant Troy, Wildeve, Alec D'Urberville benefit from this universal sympathy. Hardy wanted people to be happy and so Good and Evil seemed irrelevant in such an indifferent universe.

This then was the one important approach to Thomas Hardy, the poet and novelist. Contemporary critics during the life of Hardy had received rather coolly what they saw as the first experiments of a young writer under the influence now of Wilkie Collins, now of George Eliot. As Hardy developed his characteristic rural themes, George Eliot increasingly appeared the obvious comparison, and a standard by which to judge him. Points about which the critics had misgivings were sensationalism in the development of plot, clumsiness, and pedantry in the style where the author was speaking in his own person, and an unreal heightening of the wit and humour, as well as the general level of speech, of the rustic chorus. As George Eliot's reputation declined soon after her death, she was less

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often invoked as a standard of comparison, and critics even began to blame her influence for the pedantic element in Hardy's style. Meanwhile appreciation was growing of his feeling for the rural tradition, his description of nature, and his creation of atmosphere. Havelock Elliot's 1883 appraisal marks a further stage with its claims for psychological insight in the portrayal of women. In time, Hardy's strength was seen resting in rural tragedy. Occasionally, the critics of the eighties would touch on his pessimism or, as with *The Woodlanders*, point to a disagreeable handling of sexual morality. The blunting of critical sensitiveness appears in the more extreme views of both sides in the debate. Hardy's most perceptive critics were not always those who spoke most loudly in defense of him as progressive and advanced. By the time the storm had died down, his work as a novelist was finished and could be surveyed as a whole in an increasingly detached perspective. His thought was analysed and his tragic fictions classified and fitted into academic categories. The tendency to work out parallels with the classical tragedians was increased by the vast epic scale of *The Dynasts*. W.L. Courtney contributed a significant two-part essay to *Fortnightly* on "Mr. Hardy and Aeschylus." But now the qualities of style and narrative technique which had provoked criticism earlier were less often remarked on, or tended to be played down.
The worst attacks against Hardy came from a band of critics under the leadership of T.S. Eliot. The most arrogant statement of Eliot's disapproval is in *After Strange Gods*. It has set Hardy down as a "symptom of decay", a victim of emotion run morbid, "a minor poet" whose matter of communication is not "particularly wholesome or edifying." This is in line with the invective and scathing attacks by F.R. Leavis, Henry James and R.L. Stevenson.

The 1940 Hardy centennial number of *The Southern Review* contains several explorations of Hardy's fiction by several highly intelligent and honest critics. The love of the macabre coincidence and grotesque mischance, the cruel imaginings and manipulations, all the bad luck and all the mismatched destinies, the darkness of the physical and moral landscapes, the awareness of dwindling energies, and the sense of man's appalling limitations - all these are highlighted in the 40s by many resourceful critics.

The critics of this phase began to see that Hardy was not a "typical Victorian". To many of them he seemed to exemplify the more modern, adventurous, questioning spirit which came into literature about the turn of the century and led on directly to the world of D.H. Lawrence.

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To Donald Davidson must be given the credit of approaching Hardy as a novelist who brought his tradition with him. The old fashioned quality in Hardy was in his mind rather than in "folk-lore." Davidson pointed out with distinction that in view of this habit of mind, Hardy's stories were an extension, in the form of a modern prose fiction, of a traditional ballad or an oral tale. He saw that Hardy's purpose as a writer seems to have been to unravel human lots in terms that would present it as most recognizably, and validly, and completely human. To Davidson goes the credit of giving us a better understanding of the meanings, pessimistic or otherwise in Hardy's mature fiction.

Both Morton Dawen Zabel and Katherine Anne Porter described Hardy's modern tensions and ambiguities and his role in freeing the novel from an unenergized realism. But Davidson understood the milieu in which Hardy wrote. One is glad to have a spirited, able and critically demolishing essay by Katherine Anne Porter, Alan Dent commenting on Lord David Cecil's account on Thomas Hardy said that it was:

A superb and penetrating piece of criticism .... what nobility of praise, shrewdness of assessment, and sharpness of critical perception.  

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Cecil's book on Hardy was easily the finest piece of literary criticism which had come since 1934. Early Victorian Novelists by the same author appeared in the same year. David Cecil in his account avoided any form of whim and pedantry, his concentration on his subject and his will to discern what Hardy was driving at rather than to say what he ought to have done distinguishes the work. These qualities alone made his book valuable as important criticism.

What really attracts one in our reading of the stimulating and constructive essays in the Hardy centenary issue is the complete absence of the stale, conventional approach or of any aesthetic posturing, in this collective enterprise. Q.D. Leavis in her review of The Southern Review, Thomas Hardy Centennial Issue said about the articles:

It is certainly the most helpful critical work on Hardy I know, and since the best essays in it are by tough-minded critics with a corresponding tightness of argument and idiom, who raise many debatable critical problems, it could be recommended for teaching purposes at the university.  

Albert J. Guerard's account of the novelist was in the words of a reviewer in the New York Herald Tribune; "Crisp, challenging, informative, highly intelligent .... He has crammed into this little book more vital comment

on his author than can be found in a whole shelf of ordinary criticism." Guerard's critical study broke sharply with the traditional view of the novelist. No longer does Guerard describe Hardy as "a ponderous old school philosopher" but a great story teller. Though Guerard's critical study had little to say about Hardy's life and reading or about the London and Dorset of Hardy's day, his pessimism or fatalism, yet he was in no way perverse in his evaluations and above all in his descriptions.

One of the great "subjects" of Hardy was, of course, the sad passing of the stable rural life, the decay of old customs and of local traditions. Guerard did acknowledge that though the decay of old customs was more significant to Hardy the aesthetic changes were the ones which concerned him more.

It is from this group of critics that we get few of the meanings, pessimistic or otherwise, that we commonly ascribe to him. Their purpose seems to have been to decipher the central quality of Hardy's vision. That Hardy succeeded best when he wrote of rural Wessex is significant; it was left to the next group of critics to carry on their findings and to relate his novels to the condition of rural England in the latter half of the nineteenth century as acknowledged not only by some of Hardy's famous critics but by Hardy himself.
With Donald Davidson, Katherine Anne Porter, Morton Dauwen Zabel, W.H. Auden, David Cecil, Edmund Blunden and Albert J. Guerard we have critics who were no longer vitiated by hardened preoccupations about fatalism and pessimism. They no longer condemned books that were once opposed by nearly all reviewers and critics at first. They realised that the meaning and interest of a novel lay in what the novel says, not in what it was intended to say. They were concerned with what the novelist did, not with deciding whether he did what he set out to do. They were pioneers of a new and modern approach. The most impressive result of such a study is that Hardy emerges as being more important than is commonly supposed. The critical accounts that were yet to come surveyed the multiple facets of Thomas Hardy's talent shedding new light on the works of "the grand old man of English Letters." Modern Hardy criticism owes an immense debt to the critics of the 40's in particular to those who wrote for the Southern Review. Hardy remains a novelist of unusual power and integrity, who gave an epic dimension to the familiar realism of the Victorian novel.