Chapter-2

Under the Greenwood Tree: Re-living the Past in its Exuberance

"I can sing my treble [...]"

Till 1869, Hardy’s attempt in the field of prose fiction, resulted in an unpublished novel (The Poor Man and the Lady) and a published mystery thriller (Desperate Remedies), the endeavour which was termed by Duffin as a ‘false start’(2), considering the successful trail of ‘Wessex novels’ that followed. Meanwhile, Under the Greenwood Tree had already started to take shape in Hardy’s mind. According to Pinion in 1869 (Autumn) Hardy “laid aside UGT after ‘about half’ had been written, for DR” (THD 3).

The sense of pessimism and tragedy, which the majority of critics consider to be inalienable from Hardy [though the author would have reservations about the notion and would prefer instead to be called a ‘meliorist’ (Blunden 111)], is complemented at this stage by his mirthful manner of depicting the rural ambience in the novel. As Irving Howe observes, ‘When it suited his purpose Hardy could brush aside his philosophical interests and in sections of novels like Under the Greenwood Tree and Far from the Madding Crowd the comic impulse is strongly at work’. (67)
Under the Greenwood Tree bears ample evidence to the claim. The novel abounds in the elements of laughter, optimism and fulfillment, and festive scenes and merriment. It is considered to have ‘a freshness about it which Hardy never again achieved’ (Rutland 151). The novel reverberates with the mirth of festive enjoyment that involves drinking, dancing and romance. Horace Moule in The Saturday Review (28 September 1872, xxiv, 417) observed, ‘the author has produced a series of rural pictures full of life and genuine colouring’ (Cox 11). This can perhaps offer an explanation as regards the slender volume of the novel; it is considerably short in comparison to his later ones, possibly because mirthful attitude cannot be sustained for long, as life is full of tough and excruciating hurdles.

The novel had its genesis in the praise the author received from John Morley, a reader for Macmillan, for the country scenes (Gibson 52) in his unpublished novel The Poor Man and the Lady and his subsequent decision to use some of its materials. Though Howe observes that the verse of William Barnes had been a major influence on Hardy (46) the impact of George Eliot’s Adam Bede and Silas Marner and Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cramford also cannot be ignored. Pinion comments, “George Eliot’s praise of rural life in Dutch paintings (Adam Bede xvii), and her portrayal of the old village instrumental choir in ‘Amos Barton’ had made Hardy realize the
fictional possibilities of the Stinsford choir about whom he had heard so much in his boyhood. Hints for the tranter’s party came from the New Year’s Eve dance in Silas Marner, which also suggested a rustic group as chorus or commentators on principal events, an emergent role in UGT, richly developed in FMC and RN” (THD 283). According to Howe, if considered as a portrait of a fading way of life, ‘Hardy’s book is superior to both: a masterpiece in miniature. This is Hardy in his happiest, if not greatest, voice, the Hardy who writes with complete assurance about people and places he knows completely, and who writes unburdened by the obligation to be prophetic or morose’ (46).

The role of the choir furnishing the background was so vital that Hardy in the 1912 preface to the novel declared that, as intended originally, it would have been more appropriate if the novel had been titled The Mellstock Quire, but it was ‘altered to Under the Greenwood Tree because titles from poetry were in fashion just then’ (Life 86).

The title is adopted from the opening song of Act II, Scene v of As You Like It, sung by Amiens, a lord attending the banished Duke in the Forest of Arden. The song, representing a jolly mood, is directly in line with the pastoral idyll.

Under the greenwood tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither: 
Here shall he see 
No enemy,

But winter and rough weather. (1-8)

Hardy’s rustics, like the lords and attendants of the Duke, though banished from the pomp and grandeur of the aristocrat society, have the vitality to enjoy life with their limited means under the blue firmament without any sense of enmity to their social superiors. The second stanza comes closer to the simple unambitious, happy ways of the rustics with their gay abandon, and ‘zest for eating and drinking—

Who doth ambition shun
And loves to live in the sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleased with what he gets.
Come hither, come hither, come hither;
Here shall he see
No enemy,
But winter and rough weather. (38-46)

In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, ‘a masterpiece in miniature’ (Howe 46), Hardy drew materials directly from life. The venue of the novel is Mellstock, which is modelled on Hardy’s native place Stinsford. The ‘Mellstock Quire’ is actually a literary version of the Stinsford choir with which the author had a long family association. Hardy’s biographers show that music was inherent in the culture of his family where singing and music-making were as natural as existence itself. Millgate substantiates: “He displayed from an early age an ecstatic musical sensitivity, so that the sounds of his father’s violin of an evening could move him to dance and weep simultaneously, and in the poem ‘Song to an Old Burden’ memories of his father’s playing are mingled with those of his mother’s singing” (37). He was given a toy concertina when he was only four and a few years later he started to play violin. Afterwards he accompanied his father to local dances and festivities where he participated with full vigour and earnestness. William Rutland goes on record that the music of Stinsford church was actually created by Hardy’s grandfather, Thomas Hardy the senior (1778-1837) who played his bass-viol in the church at two services every Sunday from 1801 or 1802 till his death in 1837. He was accompanied by his two sons [Thomas Hardy the second (1811-1892) and James Hardy], ‘who, with
other reinforcement, continued playing till about 1842, the period of performance by the three Hardys thus covering inclusively a little under forty years’ (152). Thomas Hardy the senior not only performed here, but whenever it was necessary, he went with his violoncello to assist the choirs in the neighbouring parish churches, often to the great satisfaction of the gathering. The performance of the Church choir throughout the year included carol-playing and singing at Christmas, which was also enjoyed by Thomas Hardy the Second.

F.E. Hardy informs, “The parish being a large and scattered one, it was the custom of Thomas Hardy the senior to assemble the rather perfunctory rank-and-file of the choir at his house; and this necessitated suppers, and suppers demanded (in those days) plenty of liquor. This was especially the case on Christmas Eve itself, when the rule was to go to the northern part of the parish and play at every house before supper; then to return to Bockhampton and sit over the meal till twelve o’ clock, during which interval a good deal was consumed at the Hardys’ expense, the choir being mainly poor men and hungry’ (12). She also informs that the practice was maintained by Thomas Hardy the Second which is depicted in Under the Greenwood Tree or The Mellstock Quire though the characters, incidents and manners of the novel were conceived by its author years afterwards the
choir had ceased to exist when Thomas Hardy the Third was about one year of age.

The Stinsford choir was enfeebled by the demise of Hardy’s grandfather and the replacement of the old vicar Reverend Edward Murray (a musician and an active supporter of the choir) by a new one. The choir was unfortunately dissolved in 1843 when the church authority decided that the payment to the choir members should be given by raising public subscription, and not from the parish revenues. ‘Excluded from the church, the surviving members of the choir continued to perform on secular occasions, such as village weddings and Christenings, while the custom of Christmas carolling from house to house was kept up for a good many years thereafter’. (Milgate 14)

Though not witnessed by him, Hardy must have heard the stories of the old choir from his parents and grandmother. Anyway, the performance of the choir is vividly presented in his novels, short stories and poems. Fancy, who takes charge of the church music, along with her new organ may call back to Hardy’s cousin Teresa (the daughter of James Hardy), ‘who played the harmonium at Stinsford after the revolution in parochial church music which provided the background accompaniment to the early love-story of Dick Dewy and Fancy Day’ (Pinion 21). Hardy’s keen interest in the church
music is brought out in his note on the occasion when his sister Mary became a church organist: ‘Tell me about the organ and how the Sundays go off — I am uncommonly interested’, he wrote in a letter to her from London in 1863 (21).

**Under the Greenwood Tree** weaves the light romance of Dick and Fancy, observes Pinion in *A Hardy Companion*, with the contemporary times which saw the diminishing fortune of the choir, though certainly the latter’s role is not an inferior one, as they represent Hardy’s first rustic chorus. “The members of the Mellstock choir are not presented equally, but among them are lesser, static perennial figures, which are undoubtedly the forerunners of the comic rustics in the chorus of commentators and gossips to be found in *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *The Return of the Native*. They owe something to the observation of a countryman who could regard local characters with keen humorous detachment after a period of absence in London, but much more to creative genius inspired by Shakespearean and Dickensian influences. Their quaint angularity is Hardy’s most idiosyncratic achievement in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. In saying that ‘the attempt has been to draw the characters humourously, without *caricature’*, Hardy implied a sympathetic treatment” (Pinion 22).
It is also observed that the amusement which Hardy obtains from his portraiture of the Mellstock choir is more dependent on its inherent pictorial quality and upon the method of their presentation. Whereas George Eliot’s pictorial quality ‘involves responses analogous to those which the general art-lover might experience before a picture, Hardy’s often develops the comic potential latent in the difference between a scene in nature and its two-dimensional representation on a flat surface’ (Bullen 47). Hardy’s description of the Mellstock choir has frequently been compared with Thomas Webster’s painting *A Village Choir* (1847) which he must have observed in the collection at South Kensington. ‘Hardy’s arrangement of the figures in Mr Maybold’s doorway is similar to that in Webster’s composition, each figure partly obscured by the one in front, and whole group exuding rustic joviality’ (Bullen 46).

Hardy depicts *Under the Greenwood Tree* as ‘A Rural Painting of the Dutch School’ (the earlier subtitle of the novel provided by Hardy himself) by which he endeavoured to provide a portraiture of the rural life around him in his youth and he contemplated it, ‘as a series of pictures painted with the delicate exactness of detail and the mellow colouring of Vermeer and Hobbema’ (Cecil 97).
'This story of the Mellstock Quire and its old established west-gallery musicians', Hardy clarifies in the 1896 preface to this novel, 'is intended to be a fairly true picture, at first hand, of the personages, ways and customs which were common among such orchestral bodies in the villages of fifty or sixty years ago'. He also observes, 'The zest of these bygone instrumentalists must have been keen and staying, to take them, as it did on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week through all weathers to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes. They usually received so little in payment for their performances that their efforts were really a labour of love'.

The novel opens on a cold and starry night of a Christmas Eve. Dick, while going along a lane towards Mellstock Cross, comes across the choir members including Michael Mail, the fiddler, Thomas Leaf, Mr Robert Penny, the boot-and shoe-maker, Elias Spinks and Joseph Bowman who are going to the residence of Dick’s father Reuben Dewy, the tranter.

'Neighbours, there's time enough to drink a sight of drink now afore bedtime?' said Mail.

'True, true – time enough to get as drunk as lords!' replied Bowman cheerfully' (UGT 5)
Their fragmentary conversation brings out their zest for drinking and merry-making as well as their interest in the social superiors. This obviously manifests carnival features. Bristol observes, ‘Carnival is a travesty; costumes, insignia of rank and identity, and all other symbolic manifestations are mimicked or misappropriated for purposes of aggressive mockery and laughter’ (63). However, no ‘aggressive mockery’ is intended in this conversation; they simply get a satisfaction by comparing their delight with that of their social superiors.

Mail’s opinion is taken jovially and they all advance to the tranter’s cottage. Here we come across Reuben, William Dewy (or grandfather William), and Mrs Dewy, the tranter’s wife and the four children Susan, Jim, Bessy and Charley. Receiving the guests cordially Reuben ‘carefully began to wind a strip of brown paper round a brass tap he held in his hand.’ He says,

This in the cask here is a drop o’ the right sort’ (tapping the cask); ‘tis a real drop o’cordial from the best picked apples — Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such-like [...] . The water-cider from ’em is as good as most people’s best cider is.’ (UGT 7)
During the conversation they also remember their deceased companion Sam Lawson and miss him on this particular occasion—

‘Ah, Sam was a man,’ said Mr Penny, contemplatively.

‘Sam was!’ said Bowman.

‘Especially for a drap o’ drink,’ said the tranter. (UGT 9)

As soon as a quart or two of the cider is brought to the table, the guests rearrange their postures with widespread knees and eagerly look forward to the beverage to be served. The tranter informs his father that they are waiting for him. Hardy finely captures the mood of the Bacchanalian mirth which can justify David Cecil’s opinion: ‘His books communicate a much higher temperature of feeling than most novels do. […] There is, unexpectedly, a great deal of joy. Hardy’s pessimism did not spring from a low-spirited temperament. On the contrary, the same sensibility that made him so acutely susceptible to life’s sorrows made him also exquisitely responsive to its joys.’(104)

Their love of music even at the cost of postponing their mirth of drinking on a chilly Christmas Eve night reveals their genuine zest. Music and song are as instinctive and primary to them as food. ‘To old William, music meant more than life itself,’ observes Paul Turner (29).
Wishing the choir members a merry Christmas and welcoming Old James (grandfather on the maternal side), he proposes to practise a difficult Christmas carol,

‘Better try over number seventy-eight before we start, I suppose?’ said William, pointing to a heap of old Christmas-carol books on a side table.

‘Wi’ all my heart,’ said the choir generally.

‘Number seventy-eight was always a teaser — always. I can mind him ever since I was growing up a hard boy-chap.’

‘But he’s a good tune, and worth a mint o’ practice,’ said Michael.

(UGT 12)

They recall the old vicar who had given them liberty in maintaining the musical life of the parish. During this conversation, the introduction of Fancy Day to the church is anticipated; yet they are ready to test her by her response to their music.

‘By the way,’ he [grandfather William] continued in a fresher voice, and looking up, ‘that young crater, the schoolmis’es, must be sung to tonight wi’ the rest? If her ear is fine as her face, we shall have enough to do to be up-sides with her.’ (UGT 15)
Their dialogue reveals their interest in any newcomer. Despite the hardships in their day-to-day life they have not lost their curiosity in general matters of life. Fancy was the new pretty schoolmistress, a daughter of the soil, who has just completed her teacher's training before joining the local school. It is possible to trace the shadow of Hardy’s cousin Tryphena Spark in the description of Fancy Day.1

Shortly after ten, the singing boys reach Reuben’s house and all of the choir members along with the boys make elaborate preparations to go out for carol singing round the parish of Mellstock. They have already consumed plenty of liquor—

The cider mug was emptied for the ninth time (UGT 15)

Their zest for the joys of life is once again revealed by the elaborate care with which they get ready for the occasion.

In this context one is reminded of Hardy’s poem titled Great Things:

Sweet cyder is a great thing,

A great thing to me,

Spinning down to Weymouth town

By ridgway thirstily,

And maid and mistress summoning

Who tend the hostelry:
O cyder is a great thing,

A great thing to me! (WTH 445)

Just before midnight with the moon in its third quarter, the choir starts their journey. Grandfather William with his violoncello plays the bass, Dick’s instrument is a treble violin, and the tranter plays the tenor and Michael Mail the second violin.

Music used to be a vital part of the age-old folk tradition of these people who drew their sustenance and joviality from a collective pursuit of the same. However, already in UGT they are shown as apprehending coming changes; the simple group nostalgically look back to the times gone by

‘Times have changed from the times they used to be,’ said Mail, regarding nobody can tell what interesting old panoramas with an inward eye, and letting his outward glance rest on the ground, because it was as convenient a position as any. ‘People don’t care much about us now! I’ve been thinking we must be almost the last left in the county of the old string players? Barrel-organs, and the things next door to ’em that you blow wi’ your foot, have come in terribly of late years.’
‘Ay!’ said Bowman, shaking his head; and old William, on seeing him, did the same thing.

‘More’s the pity,’ replied another. ‘Time was — long and merry ago now! — when not one of the varmints was to be heard of; but it served some of the quires right. They should have stuck to strings as we did, and kept out clarinets, and done away with serpents If you’d thrive in musical religion, stick to strings, says I.’

‘Strings be safe soul-lifters, as far as that do go,’ said Mr Spinks.

(UGT 17)

The last words manifest their robust belief in and respect for music. But the entire conversation subtly reveals their pathetic apprehension that they were going to be replaced soon by the new generation of musicians equipped with modern musical instruments like barrel organ or harmonium. The nostalgic notes can be traced to the author’s own personal reminiscences. James Gibson observes, ‘Under the Greenwood Tree is redolent of Hardy’s own childhood, a warm and affectionate picture of a community which has changed little with the years and is apparently secure from those outside influences and developments which will eventually sound its death-knell’ (54).
The rustic singers in this novel, however, already sense the approaching change and displacement, though the realization cannot crush their joyous revelry at this stage. Irving Howe observes—

It is a novel that draws its strength from the life of a community still quite sure of itself, still largely untroubled by intrusions of restlessness, and still able to gain a degree of satisfaction, if not an intense spiritual recovery, from a steady adherence to Christian rites. Not much religion survives in Wessex, but many values are visible which have their source in a long-flourishing and complex religious culture: a tempered humanness, an easy flow of sociability, a contentment with economic arrangements, all signs not of primitive and untutored virtue but of the molding presence of a deeply set tradition. (47)

The roaming choir performs carols number seventy-eight, fifty-nine and sixty-four in front of the schoolhouse and is thanked by the new schoolmistress Fancy Day. Dick, having a sight of her for the first time, is amazed at her prettiness. They sing a couple of carols before the residence of the churchwarden Shiner who insults them by slamming his window on their face. Rueben interprets the situation thus—
‘Only a drap o’ drink got into his head,’ said the tranter. ‘Man’s well enough when he’s in his religious frame. He’s in his worldly frame now. Must ask en to our bit of a party tomorrow night, I suppose, and so put en in humour again. We bear no mortal man ill-will.’ (UGT 22)

With their earthy common sense these people can draw a clear line of distinction between the ‘religious frame’ and ‘earthly frame’ of a person; obviously they have their empathy for the ‘earthly’ one. The simple rustics are devoid of any kind of social acrimony and sporting enough to accept criticism. The tranter’s comment also carries the hint of a sly subversive joke on the church members and their hypocrisy. As Bristol comments, “The mockery of ‘holy theology’ and of every other serious interpretation of the world is the normal state of affairs in every carnivalesque procession” (65), Hardy also projects that spirit here, though at a comparatively subdued level.

The choir crosses the Mellstock Bridge and while approaching the churchyard, they come across Voss with hot mead and bread-and-cheese (as he has been instructed by the Tranter to remain ready with these). They decide to eat and drink before proceeding further. Having done that within the church, they tune their instruments and again emerge into the night-air.
Their unstinted enthusiasm for singing and music is never more boisterously delineated by Hardy than here.

The next performance is held at the vicarage front and the newly arrived vicar receives them with formal air. The difference between the sophisticated individual and the simple rustic is apparent. Horace Moule, in his review, exclaims,

We doubt whether the night’s doings of a party of carol-singers have ever been told as in this novel (Cox 12).

The tranter and his family make meticulous preparations with their musical instruments for the Christmas morning. The choir members arrive at the church and ‘rattled up the wooden stairs of the gallery like a regiment of cavalry’ (UGT 16).

Gradually Fancy and Mr Maybold enter the church. The music on Christmas mornings is often below the general standard of regular performances. The singing boys remain tired due to their open-air expedition of the previous night and its consequent exertion. The damp atmosphere aggravates the poor performance as the strings of the instruments due to their long exposure to the night air emit odd sounds. The throats of the congregation become sufficiently husky with coughing and hemming necessary for tuning.
When the singing was in progress there was suddenly discovered to be a strong and shrill reinforcement from some point, ultimately found to be the school-girl's aisle. At every attempt it grew bolder and more distinct. At the third time of singing, these intrusive feminine voices were as mighty as those of the regular singers; in fact, the flood of sound from this quarter assumed such an individuality, that it had a time, a key, almost a tune of its own, surging upwards when the gallery plunged downwards, and the reverse. (UGT 28)

This unprecedented rise of 'the other' makes the situation all the more humorous as such happening has never occurred in the history of the locality. The girls, like the rest of the gathering, have always been submissive and respectful followers of the choir. The choir members are visibly disturbed at such proceedings—

'Never mind! Let 'em sing too - 'twill make it all the louder- hee, hee!' said Leaf.

'Thomas Leaf, Thomas Leaf! Where have you lived all your life?' said grandfather William sternly.

The quailing Leaf tried to look as if he had lived nowhere at all. (UGT 29)
However, this innocent irritation over trifles is smoothened by the tranter—

‘When all’s said and done, my sonnies,’ Reuben said, ‘there’d have been no real harm in their singing if they had let nobody hear ’em, and only jined in now and then.’ (UGT 29)

This comment brings out the generous and considerate nature of the rustics who are not habituated to think negative. Even when there is cause for feeling annoyed they would prefer to give it a shrug and go ahead without malice towards anyone.

Elaborate arrangements are made at the tranter’s house for the Christmas party to be held in the evening. The floor is swept vigorously and the finest yellow sand is strewn thereupon. Large knives and forks are brought out and the cider barrel is ready. All the guests have gathered at the tranter’s party. At ten Dick starts tuning his fiddle and becomes restless for a jig. Grandfather William observes that there should not be any dancing at all till Christmas day is out, i.e., till it is midnight. Meanwhile, being enthused by some warm mead Mr. Spinks remarks,

‘Dancing,’ he said, ‘is a most strengthening, livening, and courting movement, ’specially with a little beverage added! And dancing is good. (UGT 32)."
Drinking was an indispensable element of the carnival tradition, and wine was consumed without any inhibition, and with much gusto. “Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel epitomise — in the exaggerated way of delightful fantasy — what on the English side of the channel was largely known and fondly held by the common man at the time as ‘the Lord of Misrule;’ and it is this tradition that continues, though in a much enfeebled way, in the drunken revelry of common villagers in Hardy’s [novels and] short stories” (Kundu, Atlantic Critical Review 75).

In the interim period singing goes on.

Just before twelve Dick again tunes his fiddle and as soon as it is midnight, he appears from back quarters ready for the dance. Old William instantly takes the bass-viol and touches its strings ‘as irreligiously as could be desired’ (UGT 32). Now, it is all secular merriment and uninhibited joy. Music and dancing are obvious parts of these revelries along with plenty of eating and drinking. They start with the country-dance ‘Truimph, or Follow my Lover’ where Mrs Penny becomes the dance-partner of Rueben and Mrs Dewy is selected by Mr Penny,

who made so much of his limited height by a judicious carriage of the head, straightening of the back, and important flashes of
his spectacle-glasses, that he seemed almost as tall as the tranter.

(UGT 32)

Mr Shiner, the churchwarden, quite willingly joins the party apparently oblivious of his encounter with the choir the previous night. At the moment of revelry, all acrimony is forgotten and everybody participates in the jovial occasion. Dick gets the opportunity to have Fancy as his dance-partner despite some private machinations of Farmer Shiner. Amidst the other dancing ladies, she looks 'like a flower among vegetables' (UGT 33). From a distance the pair — Dick and Fancy — appears to be a couple tripping down a lane to be wedded. Mrs Crumpler, a bulky woman, is dancing very smoothly in a clean apron, and her feet being not visible, it appears to imaginative brains that she is rolling as castors.

The dancing reaches a high pitch and there follows a vivid description of the wild revelry:

The ear-rings of the ladies now flung themselves wildly about, turning violent summersaults, banging this way and that, and then swinging quietly against the ears sustaining them. (UGT 33) [...] Minute after minute glided by, and the party reached the period when ladies' back-hair begins to look forgotten and dissipated; when a perceptible dampness makes itself apparent upon the
faces even of delicate girls – a ghastly dew having for some time rained from the features of their masculine partners; when skirts begin to be torn out of their gathers; when elderly people, who have stood up to please their juniors, begin to feel sundry small tremblings in the region of the knees, and to wish the interminable dance was at Jericho; when (at country parties of the thorough sort) waistcoats begin to be unbuttoned, and when the fiddlers’ chairs have been wriggled, by the frantic bowing of their occupiers, to a distance of about two feet from where they originally stood (UGT 34).

The performance of the Mellstock people reminds one of Bakhtin’s observation: ‘Abundance and the all-people’s element also determine the gay and festive character of all images of bodily life; they do not reflect the drabness of everyday existence. The material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle, it is a “banquet for all the world” ’ (RHW 19).

Cecil’s observations about Hardy’s own personal response to such rural carnivals encourage us to consider the description from the biographical perspective as well.

When the normal people round him let themselves go at a party, he did not instinctively stand aside, aloof and unresponsive. On
the contrary, he was infected by their spirit — he wanted to join in. From the time he was a boy and used to go fiddling with his father, he loved parties. But his enjoyment was enhanced by the finer strain in him; he saw the party imaginatively, it was lit with the light of poetry. The consequence is that no other of our novelists has described parties so enchantingly: the feast in Far from the Madding Crowd; the wild, riotous gaiety round the bonfire in The Return of the Native; the Christmas evening with the mummers, and the dance at tranter Dewy’s inn in Under the Greenwood Tree (Cecil 105).

In this context the second stanza of the poem “Great Things” may be cited:

The dance it is a great thing,

A great thing to me,

With candles lit and partners fit

For night-long revelry;

And going home when day-dawning

Peeps pale upon the lea:

O dancing is a great thing,

A great thing to me! (WTH 445)
During the course of dancing partners are changed and Mr Shiner, in accordance with the rule of the dance, leaves his original partner and after much maneuvering gets Fancy as his dance-mate to the disappointment of Dick, who, having no other alternative, dances with young Lizzy. However, at length, he secures Fancy for the most fabulous country-dances, beginning with six-hands-round. Before starting the round the tranter proposes that every male member should pull off his jacket considering the increased temperature. Though Mrs Dewy objects to it, three of the bulky dancers readily agree to the proposal and they, along with the tranter himself, take off their coats and

the four sufferers from heat soon reappeared, marching in close column, with flapping shirt-sleeves, and having, as common to them all, a general glance of being now a match for any man or dancer in England or Ireland (UGT 36).

The elaborate description has its emphasis on the mood of hilarity.

And now a further phase of revelry had disclosed itself. It was the time of night when a guest may write his name in the dust upon the tables and chairs, and a bluish mist pervades the atmosphere, becoming a distinct halo round the candles; when people's nostrils, wrinkles, and crevices in general, seem to be getting
gradually plastered up; when the very fiddlers as well as the
dancers get red in the face, the dancers having advanced further
still towards incandescence, and entered the cadaverous phase;
the fiddlers no longer sit down, but kick back their chairs and saw
madly at the strings, with legs firmly spread and eyes closed,
regardless of the visible world (UGT 36).

Eventually the dance comes to an end; the tranter goes to the cider and ale
mugs on the table, fills up the cups and hands round the refreshment. Mrs.
Penny admits that her heart has not been in such a thumping condition of
uproar since she used to sit on Midsummer-eves to see who her husband was
going to be. She reminisces how on such an occasion she had waited quite
determined to see whether John Wildway was going to marry her or not; she
had put the bread-and-cheese and beer ready, as ordained by the witch’s
book, opening the door she waited in full tension till midnight. And
ultimately there came through the door ‘a little small man in the lane wi’ a
shoemaker’s apron on’ (UGT 37). Finally this particular man became her
life-partner. Supper continues with jovial comments and conversation.
Michael Mail observes that ‘there’s a friendly tie of some sort between
music and eating’. Mail narrates his experience of eating fried liver at the
Three Mariners at Casterbridge simultaneously listening to a brass band
struck up in the street. The tranter, pointing to Grandfather Dewy, who is just then filling his mouth with food, says that Old William will starve to death for the sake of music even at this age, just as he would have done at the age of fifteen. The party ends with ‘a new stock of cider, ale, mead and home-made wines’ (UGT 40).

In the second chapter of the second part (‘Spring’) entitled ‘A Meeting of the Quire’ we come across the choir members who have received the news that some of the hands are going to be replaced in the church by some new instrumentalists.

The rustics can realize that time has changed and they have to submit to it, and making way for the new organs and organists. There is an element of precariousness mingled in their enjoyment of music. In spite of all its sweetness and flavour it is going to die out in the face of the inevitable process of time and change. A note of sadness thus sneaks into the joviality. Rueben said,

As I was saying, if you or I, or any man, was to shake your fist in father’s face this way, and say, “William, your life or your music!” he’d say, “My life!” Now that’s father’s nature all over; and you see, sir, it must hurt the feelings of a man of that
kind for him and his bass-viol to be done away wi’ neck and crop.’ (UGT 60)

It is decided that the organ would be introduced at or about the next Michaelmas. The courteousness of the vicar impresses the rustics though they can realize that he succeeds in convincing them about the superiority of the barrel organ in a decent but diplomatic way—‘That was very nice o’ the man, even though words be wind’ (UGT 62).

This comment reveals the sarcasm, though very faintly, that attends withering wisdom. But they have enough ambiances to absorb the disappointment—

   Everybody must be managed. Queens must be managed: kings must be managed; for men want managing almost as much as women, and that’s saying a good deal. (UGT 62)

At the same time this comment not only manifests their consciousness of the social situation, it also brings out a kind of ‘de-throning’ or ‘uncrowning’ which is the essence of the carnival spirit. Their critical attitude towards the authority and the church is also revealed by the following remarks—

   ‘[...] Why, Shiner is for putting forward that young woman that only last night I was saying was our Dick’s sweetheart, but I suppose can’t be, and making much of her in the sight of the
congregation, and thinking he’ll win her by showing her off. Well perhaps ’a woll.’

‘Then the music is second to the woman, the other churchwarden is second to Shiner, the Pa’son is second to the churchwardens, and God A’mighty is nowhere at all.’ (UGT 62-63)

This conversation suggests a subversion of the church authority under whose supervision religion had been relegated to farce. Irreverence to the monarchy and church is a part of the carnival mood. The comments bring out their rational bent of mind and utter disregard for the aberrant church authority. Besides, it is proved that these rustics are not unaware of the ways of life and psyche of their social superiors. Their mocking reference to the authority illustrates the way the powerless tries to absorb the shocks inflicted by the empowered.

In the fourth part titled ‘Autumn’ Geoffrey Day’s comments about his wife provide ample fun and humour. In a similar spirit they show readiness to mock even ‘Doom’.

‘There’s that wife o’ mine. It was her doom to be nobody’s wife at all in the wide universe. But she made up her mind that she
would, and did it twice over. Doom? Doom is nothing beside a elderly woman — quite a chiel in her hands!" (UGT 70)

In the penultimate chapter the rustics gather at the wedding ceremony of Dick and Fancy at Geoffrey’s residence. Any wedding in the parish provides an occasion for collective mirth. The chapter is titled ‘The Knot There’s No Untying’, a line adopted from Thomas Campbell’s poem ‘Freedom and love’. Dick enters a bit late much to the consternation of Fancy who is eagerly waiting for the arrival. Having a glance at the bridesmaids, he jokingly remarks,

‘’Tis a pity I can’t marry the whole five of ye!’ said Dick, surveying them all round.

‘Heh-heh-heh!’ laughed the four bridesmaids, (UGT 138)

The rural people of Hardy never mind coarse jokes, rather they enjoy them. This indeed constitutes a vital part of their ‘sunburnt mirth’. These rural people are jolly and buoyant and capable of enjoying every gay event in spite of their hard schedule and lack of affluence. They refuse to be smothered by life and show the ability to endure merrily.

The final chapter entitled ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’ opens with the wedding party at Geoffrey’s premises. The guests comprising of the inhabitants of the parish gather under a huge, sprawling ancient tree ‘though
having no great pretensions to height’ ([UGT] 142). The structure of the tree manifests the down-to-earth existence of the rustics who do not indulge in any lofty ambition of attaining great heights. Music, dancing and singing continue in a jovial atmosphere throughout the evening. Along with the local musicians Tantrum Clangley, an efficient tambourine player, is invited on the occasion. While the dancing is in progress, the old persons sit collectively under the trunk of the tree and the grandfathers and grandmothers,

Whose dancing days were over, told stories of great impressiveness, and at intervals surveyed the advancing and retiring couples from the same retreat, as people on shore might be supposed to survey a naval engagement in the bay beyond; returning again to their tales when the pause was over ([UGT] 143).

Even when they cannot actively participate they can still enjoy the lively carnival. Five country-dances including ‘Haste to the Wedding’, two reels and three parts of hornpipes are performed and ultimately it is the time for supper. The congregation, after supper, listens to Thomas Leaf’s story about a man who gradually made his ten pounds a thousand. The tale, though
boring and without having a plot, is appreciated by the tranter; the tranter’s comment—

‘Hear, hear!’ said the tranter. ‘Better than the history of England, my sonnies!’ (UGT 145)—

is in tune with 'de-crowning' intention of a carnival.

‘Amid a medley of laughter, old shoes, and elder-wine’ (UGT 145), Dick and his better-half departed, boarding the new spring-cart of the tranter. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics Bakhtin points out that ‘the genres of the serio-comical do not rely on legend and do not sanctify themselves through it, they consciously rely on experience (to be sure, as yet insufficiently mature) and on free invention; their relationship to legend is in most cases deeply critical, and at times even resembles a cynical exposé’(108).

Thus the carnival spirit of the rural folk and their instinctive response to mirth and joviality lend a special charm to the novel. The rustic bystanders and their zest for sipping the cup of life to the lees are not to be considered a superfluity in the novel. They are part and parcel of the atmosphere of Mellstock Quire, which serves as the focus of the book. However, at the same time, the slightly disturbing note of a faint unease has already entered the carnival of dance, song and revelry though it does not yet
occupy the foreground. The unease is felt in Hardy’s poem “Friends Beyond” through the voice of William Dewy:

“Ye mid burn the old bass-viol that I set such value

by” (WTH 53)

Note

1. According to Lois Deacon and Terry Coleman in Providence and Hardy, Hardy developed a romantic attachment to Tryphena and had once decided to marry her.