

The Form of His Fiction 477

by Terry Eagleton

In 1966, Ian Gregor contributed to *Essays in Criticism* an essay entitled 'What Kind of Fiction did Hardy Write?' The simple yet arresting quality of the question posed in that title was significant on at least two grounds. First, Thomas Hardy had been for some years the subject of a good deal of critical writing, but much of it had dragged an aimless trail through the marshy terrain of Schopenhauer and the Immanent Will, fixated on peasants and pessimism. Hardy had been patronised, Freudianised, mythologised; his fiction was the lumbering vehicle of a home-spun cosmic gloom appropriate in its simplistic earnestness to a half-educated son of the soil. There had, of course, been some excellent Hardy criticism; but Professor Gregor's enquiry about the *form* of his fiction opened a new, now frequently-acknowledged perspective. The question was significant, however, not only because it had been insufficiently raised before but because it seemed precisely the right question to pose about that particular author. We don't commonly ask ourselves what kind of fiction Scott, Jane Austen or George Eliot wrote—not because those novelists don't confront us with considerably complex issues of form and *genre*, but because we shape our questions about their artistic techniques within a fairly established sense of what sort of formal enterprise we are dealing with. But with Hardy the position is different. Pastoral, melodrama, social realism, scientific naturalism, myth, fable, tragedy, ideology: it isn't only that various of these categories fit various of his novels, but that several of them can fit the same work. Maybe all developed literary forms are complex amalgams of other forms; but with Hardy the issue is at once unusually visible and troublingly elusive.

*The Great Web*¹ is essentially an extended version of Professor Gregor's original article; and its approach is to trace the evolution of form in Hardy's fiction through a chronological study of five major novels. What is most immediately impressive about the book is its sensitivity to the shape and feel of Hardy's work: there are few critics as alert as Professor Gregor to questions of tone and texture, to modulations of mood and shiftings of viewpoint, indeed to the whole deceptively simple matter of what *reading* a book actually involves. We have grown so habituated to the notion of novels as elaborated structures of meaning that we ignore the plain truth that they have a material as well as moral existence: they consist of a stack of consecutive pages to be turned over, and this—the physical index of the fact that novels are *processes*, events unfolding unevenly in time—is no merely contingent matter. 'Precisely because it is a process, a novel

¹*The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction*. Faber & Faber, London, 1974. £3.95.

looks and feels different at page 200 from how it looked and felt at page 100, whereas our methods of criticism incline to treat a novel as if it were a series of numbered paragraphs simultaneously present in the reader's mind'. Elsewhere, Ian Gregor has written of the relevance of this point to the question of *pace* in fiction: we are generally told to 'read closely', slowly savouring each phrase, but the fact is that novels demand complex shifts and adjustments in reading-pace, geared to the differential rhythms of their own narratives.

Two points emerge from this controlling critical emphasis. One is the possibility that we have here nothing less than the basis for a *phenomenology of reading*, to replace the static, abstracted consumer-models of reading we now think within; the other is a fresh insistence on the crucial role of *story* within fiction, which connects implicitly with some problems raised by the structuralist enterprise in Europe. The importance of a novel, as Gregor rightly sees, is that something *happens*, a phenomenon which no rigidly synchronic interpretative grid can account for. Synchronic models can accommodate inversion, transposition, contradiction between their terms, but this is not quite the diachronic thrust of which *narrative* is the norm. And yet it may be, as A. J. Greimas has argued, that the mind finds it necessary to grasp diachrony in what are essentially synchronic terms—that to understand narrative (historical or fictional) entails transposing change into some relatively fixed relationship between the two states which are the 'before' and 'after' of the transformative moment. Narrative, the American critic Fredric Jameson has claimed, always presupposes some fundamental feeling of change which we are then called on to account for in synchronic and analytic terms—in terms, that is to say, of narrative components which are bound to be in themselves 'static'. There are problems of obvious importance here, which Gregor's argument, in its characteristically English mode, insufficiently theorises; and it doesn't seem to me (although it perhaps doesn't seem to him either) that the substitution of a 'dynamic' text-and-reader relationship for the concept of fiction as an objective structure of meanings is a *solution*. Crucial as the development of a phenomenology of reading is, it remains true that the object of the diachronic experience of reading is still, in some sense, synchronic—a systematised, although always pluralistic, organisation of symbolic meanings. Indeed I would want to claim that it is because a text is synchronic that its fundamental truth can be disclosed. The 'deep structure' of Thomas Hardy's fiction, which persists beneath and reveals itself in the mutations of narrative, seems to me finally intelligible in relation to the dominant structures of an historical ideology; and ideology is an *objective* formation, amenable to theoretical analysis.

Professor Gregor discerns in Hardy's development as a novelist a progressive complexity of form—a progression which he traces from the relatively simplifying man/Nature dialectic of *The Return of the*

Native, through *The Mayor of Casterbridge*'s use of character to integrate landscape, action and consciousness, on to *The Woodlanders*' subtle interlacing of personal, sexual and economic strands, and finally to the fullest dramatisation of this 'great web' in *Tess* and *Jude*. *Jude* was Hardy's last novel, but it is to Professor Gregor's credit that he refuses the usual account of why this was so—that Hardy, depressed by the vicious public response *Jude* evoked, stopped writing. This, incidentally, was Hardy's account too; but it is doubtful whether novelists as great as Hardy cease to write just because of bad reviews. In *Jude*, as Ian Gregor persuasively demonstrates, Hardy is pressing up against the bounds of the realist forms he had inherited from the nineteenth century, striving to realise structures of perception which decisively transcend them. What follows *Jude the Obscure* isn't Hardy's poetry but, as Gregor points out in the fine closing gesture of his study, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*.

What *The Great Web* is implicitly arguing, to put its case in cruder terms than it would itself entertain, is that it took Thomas Hardy some time to become a realist novelist in the great nineteenth century sense—some time to discover, by experiment and incorporation, how to integrate more traditional, more partial or less productive forms (pastoral, tragedy, myth) into a total aesthetic organisation adequate to the complexity of contemporary experience. Gregor's sense of Hardy as a working, learning, evolving author is delicate and precise; no critic wedded to a merely synchronic image of the fiction (like, say, J. Hillis Miller) could see, as Gregor sees, anything at once as simple and fundamental as the fact that Hardy, having written *The Mayor*, couldn't then have written *Tess* without having written *The Woodlanders* first. It takes either a schoolboy, or a critic as deeply inward with his author's working history as Gregor, to see something as crucial and palpable as that. At the same time, however, Professor Gregor's closeness to his author has its critical drawbacks. His characteristic method is to focus sharply on a particular scene or set of scenes which suggest achieved moments of 'imaginative distillation', and then to allow their significance to resonate into the novel as a whole; and while this entails an unswerving fidelity to the feel of the text, it also forestalls an essential degree of critical abstraction and systematisation. The *pattern* of some of his arguments isn't always easy to discern; not enough is always said about the total *structure* of a work, as opposed to its local formal devices; the style of the book notably lacks a cutting-edge which a more rigorously distanced analysis might have lent it; and the problem of the relation between 'form' and 'ideas' isn't always satisfactorily resolved. There are points in the book where the argument seems to slide into a discussion of 'content' whose relevance to questions of form isn't always apparent; but there are other points where formal discourse seems insufficiently embedded in a broader context in which Hardy's 'ideas' would play their part.

To develop that final point demands some reflection on quite what literary form signifies. 'Form' is perhaps the most 'inward' way of interpreting a text, and so in Hardy's case valuably fends off the Schopenhaurians and organic community apologists; but literary form is also rooted in real history, and it is the question of the precise mediations between form and history which is to my mind the most pressing. Literary form seems to me a complex conjuncture of at least three elements: the types of artistic organisation available to the individual writer from a relatively autonomous, self-evolving *literary* history, types which he can select, permutate and transform for his purposes; structures of perception and symbolisation which spring from those wider, complex formations of historical consciousness we name *ideology*; and structures which enact and embody a certain set of social relations between the author and his audience, the producer and his consumers. It seems to me that form in the first, literary-historical sense is always selected and transmuted on the basis of the author's objective situation within the second two structures. To understand an author's use of literary form, then, involves considerably more than 'internal' evidence; it involves grasping how his confrontation of an available set of artistic forms (themselves *already* historically selected as bearers of ideology) is conditioned by the way he is inserted into his own history, as both 'thinker' and producer.

To see Thomas Hardy in this way is to arrive at an understanding of his formal complexities rather different from Professor Gregor's. For what *The Great Web* lacks is any account of *why* Hardy had the difficulties he did—why, to put it in my own simplifying terms, it took him so long to become a realist novelist in the fullest sense. Gregor's implication is that it was a question of individual artistic maturity; but there is no individual artistic biography which is not determined by a wider history. The fact is that Thomas Hardy's situation as a literary producer was ridden with contradictions. As a provincial *petit bourgeois* (son of a Dorsetshire stone-mason) who wrote for a middle-class metropolitan audience, he was simultaneously on the 'inside' and 'outside' of both his own local community and English society at large. He belonged sufficiently to 'Wessex' to explore its living, inward totality with the penetrative, all-commanding eye of the great realists; yet he was alienated enough from it by social class and education to view it through the uneasily distancing, immobilising perspective of myth. His sharp sense of Wessex as a region of socio-economic devastation and decline could release the generous imaginative sympathies of the major realist novel; it could also throw him at times, provisionally and uncertainly, into the arms of those *fin-de-siècle* naturalistic ideologies which registered their own helpless estrangement from social experience in the 'scientific' impassivity of their authorial viewpoint. Hardy's productive relation to his audience was no less double-edged. His use

of myth and pastoral reflects, very occasionally, an anxious pact with their own flat patronage of the 'bucolic'; but he also deploys the universalising frames of myth, melodrama, fable and tragedy to combat such patronage—to confer major status on fiction liable to be dismissed as of merely provincial import. The problem of how to reconcile these conflictual artistic forms—is Alec D'Urberville *bourgeois arriviste*, pantomime devil, melodramatic villain, symbol of Satanic evil?—enacts a set of ideological and historical contradictions. With Hardy, indeed, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, it is quite literally a problem of *how to write*—how to stay verbally faithful to his own marvellously immediate experience while projecting it into the sorts of 'literary' language consumed in the metropolis. By the time of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy has turned on his own audience: that novel is less an offering to them than a calculated assault. Its refusal to confine itself to commonly received categories of 'realism' is also a partial refusal to become a commodity. By the time of *Tess* and *Jude*, Hardy has been able to transmute his realist comprehension of Wessex to the level of a whole society, precisely by selecting protagonists whose agony and exploitation has its roots in the structure, not just of agrarian society, but of the *bourgeois* state of which that agrarian society is an integral sector. It is one of the most exciting and moving ironies of literary history that, having struggled his painful way through to this major achievement, having shaped and launched his unflinching indictment, there was nowhere else to go. Having arrived, Hardy had to disembark.

The division within contemporary literary criticism between 'formal' and 'ideological' approaches to fiction seems to me itself an ideological one. Professor Gregor's book doesn't challenge this disabling dichotomy; but what it does is to restore to us a fresher, more uncluttered sense of what kind of event a Hardy novel is. What I myself have learnt most enduringly from the particular bias of Ian Gregor's critical approach, in this book and elsewhere, is that, as we take the novel in our hands and turn the pages, there is a vital mode of interrogating it which precedes, and founds, the orthodox questions of 'What is it saying? What does it mean?' The determining question, always, is first of all: 'What *kind* of object, event, activity, is this?' Those of us, English teachers and students, who have to read five novels a week do so knowing that for the most part our attitude to that question is damagingly casual. By raising it so lucidly in this work, Ian Gregor has taught us more than a reading of Thomas Hardy.