

HARDY, THE GREAT PAGAN

BY LLOYD MORRIS

THOMAS Hardy, novelist and poet and pagan, will go down to posterity in company with Euripides as a literary force of sombre power and fascination. With him will also go the verdict of his contemporaries that the greatest tragedy of Hardy, was Hardy; acclaimed for his genius, berated in his expression of it, and mistaken in the conclusions to which it led him. Greatly loving his fellow-men, he stripped with his art, life's last illusions, as he thought, to their bleached gaze.

Not all authors of the pessimistic school are unqualifiedly pessimistic; some one of their works is happily free from tincture of imputed despair; somewhere a constructive intent is revealed to bestow warrant on an otherwise disintegrating artistry. But Hardy was the complete tragedian.

Even his bucolics under the greenwood tree are overcast with a pnumbra from the darker aspects of life pressing out its incrutable issues. Into the jocund revelry of his woodlanders creeps the sorrowful under-murmur of the world; slow, sad modes of Destiny weave into the choric song; and over all the idyll lies at last a poignancy more appalling by reason of its bright setting, than the ominous malevolence that broods and bides in nativeness over Egdon's gloomy heath.

With incomparable impressionistic artistry Hardy show us things as they seemed to him to be. With painful interpretation he infers that is how they really are—bidding us weep for Virtue as a fortuitous barque adrift upon a fortuitous sea: leaving us staring wildly without hope in a universe where Good is destroyed by Evil, and the conquest of Virtue is a world-purpose.

The declared felon strokes of Fate have been the theme and

vision of a countless dead. To this aspect of life some rendered tribute of philosophical acquiescence, and some railed inordinately; still others soothed themselves with songs of rue and hydromel, wherein the dark day rings at last to evensong and the tortuous river comes to end at the sea.

To the drama of existence as he saw it played, Hardy's response was neither philosophic acceptance nor mouthed puerilities at heaven. First, last and essentially he was a poet on whose heart-strings life played with iron fingers. His novels were the music of his pain—an epic threnody for humanity such as might have pealed from fettered Prometheus. If at times the artistry stuttered, it was the incoherence of a passionate sense of inability to express adequately and remedially a protest of lacerated emotion.

For the Romanticists, only the transcendent postulate of benign spirituality can satisfy the factual equation of life. Possessed of that quality, Hardy had taken noble rank among those of them who consider the microcosm in the light of the cosmic. To them, the most seemingly dreadful examples of disparity in human fortune appear, not as discontinuous circumstances evolved at parturition and devolved in corporeal death, but as reverberations from eternity. In them they witness a proceeding upwards of human entities—not by way of pagan retribution or Plotinic expiation; but through acceptance of life's dolours as opportunities presented for spiritual integration.

Writing from this larger apprehension of a purposive continuity in human life, Hardy would still have compelled our tears with his sad stories from the piteous fields of human effort. Yet anguished though the relation might be, it would not have left us at its ending with repugnant horror, despair or a negative exhortation to merely valiant endurance. On the contrary, its close would have invoked our importunities for him again and again to repeat his tales of human woe; which left us inspired with the apprehension of a benignity moving among human affairs. Then, looking athwart the world of men and things, and marking individual examples of greivous circumstance, our vision would have been of them as workings of the fermentative leaven of an ultimate good. With an inner eye we would perceive it rising to its hour of glory—not necessarily here in this wasting day; but as the usufruct of an environment sounding perhaps to more alien tongues under further skies.

Then, standing with him in fancy in the morning light beneath the gallows-tree, beside his fictional character-creation of Tess the murderess; it would have been in common belief that to the woman with pinioned hands was the last laugh; and to the "President of the Immortals" the realization that was He had been the sport. For though His human hound, Alec, had piteously ravished the woman's flesh, he could not touch her soul; though the hangman dislocated her neck, he had no power over her discarnate part. And not the "Hierarch" Himself could expugn the ethical inspiration to perhaps but one human spirit, who might come to knowledge of the lamentable story of this woman.

Without an inner vision unifying existence, Hardy must be placed among the chiefest of those brilliant paradoxes, the Romantic-Realists; who endeavor to measure the cosmic by the microcosm; and, like children trying to do a sum, are petulant, abusive or sorrowful because having left out a factor, the sum won't come right, but leaves a remainder.

Even logic fails them, for it could be eyes to a blindness which does not perceive that if Evil have its hour of power; then under the law of possibility, no less must be conceded Virtue: that if the incidence of the malign operate with material visibility; the invisible operations of a spiritualization may therefore not validly be denied.

With the yardstick of finity, Hardy essayed to scale the infinite. The discrepancy between his measuring-rod and eternity he stigmatized as a divine deficiency; wherein he beheld evil stalking triumphantly over the world on two legs a greater force than good; and innocence singled out to be the panting sport of a divine hunting. It seemed to him as he watched that to be evil was to have the seeds and quality of triumph—or at least immunity from woe; and to be virtuous was to invite calamity: that behind all the puppetry was the Showman of the Immortals who with Rabelaisian gout took his vicarious amusements of rape, murder and anguish and, then, yawning, put his toys away to sleep in the vault of the D'Urbervilles; to incinerate in limey pits of shame; to hang on a nail behind mean doors, or, toss greasy caps into the air and vociferate mechanical huzzas to the litany of a broken marionette.