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Christopher P. Baker

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432 Colby Library Quarterly

THE "GRAND DELUSION" OF JUDE FAWLEY

By CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

That "enormous height"¹ from which E. M. Forster said that Thomas Hardy conceived his novels is not only the source of the great pathetic grandeur he achieved in *Jude the Obscure*, but also the occasion of a fundamental contradiction within the characterization of Jude himself. D. H. Lawrence understood Hardy as well as he did largely because, like Hardy's, his novels were conceived deductively, as the expression of a pre-existing moral persuasion or philosophical conviction. However, in his "Study of Thomas Hardy" Lawrence offers this caveat: "It is not as a metaphysician that we must consider Hardy. He makes a poor show there. For nothing in his work is so pitiable as his clumsy efforts to push events into line with his theory of being."² Hardy did not succeed as well as Lawrence in evoking through a realistic novel the symbolic evocation of a cosmic force, and we are uncomfortably aware that Hardy's philosophizing is masquerading in the motives and aspirations of his characters. Hardy's goal is to write about individuals struggling against forces of dehumanization, but the result is seemingly such a foregone conclusion that we never witness whole personalities trying to assert themselves. To use Forster's terms, potentially "round" characters are "flattened" under the weight of more philosophical meaning than they can bear.

What mars the characterization of Jude, however, is not so much the sheer weight of Hardy's philosophizing, the vast moral and ethical implications with which Jude's every act is heavy, but rather the basic inconsistency inherent in Hardy's philosophy which robs his characters of the possibility of achieving the idealistic goals he sets before them. The inconsistency with which Hardy joined his conviction in the existence of "Crass Casualty" (in the poem "Hap") with his hope that "The Immanent Will" would "fashion all things fair" (at the close of *The Dynasts*) results in a spiritual landscape where life "has to be at once incurably evil and potentially good."³ Hardy, while affirming that he was not a pessimist, nevertheless posited

¹ *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1927), 140.

² *Phoenix* (London, 1936), 480.

³ Arthur Mizener, "Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy," *Southern Review*, VI (Summer 1940), 203.

Colby Library Quarterly 433

a universe which reduces man to a cipher, and in Jude he gives that cipher a psychology which is unconvincing because it is incredible. In the face of such a contradiction, Jude's travail becomes gratuitous because we cease to believe it is necessary. The inconsistencies of the author's ideology necessarily suggest motives for Jude's actions which are problematical. It is clear that his intent was to portray Jude as struggling against an oppressive cosmic design. Yet, inexplicably, that same design against which Jude's acts are measured is ultimately good. Jude is at odds with a moral order which ought to define his actions but cannot because it is paradoxical. Hardy's ambiguous ideology thus generates an aesthetic problem as well as a philosophical one by stripping Jude of a coherent system of values and thereby undermining the moral component of his characterization.

We must ask "What is the cause of Jude's misfortune?" and seek an answer which will lend coherence and unity to his character, a character suffering from those discontinuities of Hardy's own outlook which make Walter Allen remark that it is not surprising he was never able to solve the problem of causality in his own works.⁴ If Jude's actions at his four major decision-points in the novel are examined, they show a refusal to respond to incontrovertible facts about himself, a persistent entertainment of goals and hopes which are illusory, and a laziness which keeps him from attempting to resolve the confusion between fantasy and reality in his own life. The air here is to consider Jude on his own merits, on the basis of his daily experience and his response to it, instead of as the emblem of a predestined philosophical stance of Thomas Hardy.

Four events in Jude's life possess the capability of both feeding his aspirations and simultaneously denying them in actual fact: his marriage to Arabella, his decision to study at Christminster and his arrival there, his decision to become a minister, and his longing for Sue. In each crisis Jude's hopes are delineated as dreams rather than as the attainable possibilities which Hardy would have us take them for, and in each event Jude recognizes and ignores the impulses which would lead him away from painful but attractive illusions and towards less spectacular yet more realistic goals. By approaching Jude as a

⁴ *The English Novel* (New York, 1954), 295.

434 Colby Library Quarterly

person who has decisions to make and responsibilities to grapple with which are uninformed by Hardy's contradictory beliefs, his actions can no longer be excused by the operation of overwhelming outside forces, and he gains the credible if undesirable identity of a man who did not learn from experience and so was condemned to repeat it.

His first minor defeat occurs when he is turned out of Troutham's farmyard, and he is immediately aware of the demands that life will make: "Growing up brought responsibilities, he found. Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. . . . If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man" (17).⁵ His idealization of Christminster as the New Jerusalem is the dream of an eleven-year old boy, but his reasons for wanting to be in Christminster are not for its own sake. Christminster will be the place where he finds himself without painful effort, a place "without fear of farmers, or hindrance, or ridicule" (22). It is a Utopia to which he replies "it would just suit me" (23) without considering if he would suit it. When he receives the grammars from Phillotson his "childish idea" (26) of learning them effortlessly becomes a "grand delusion" (27). Yet Hardy does not merely describe the disappointment which Jude feels at seeing his delusion dissolve, but warps Jude's realization of the event by implying that, but for the nature of things, his disappointment might have been less "gigantic." "Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked him his trouble, and might have cheered him by saying that his notions were further advanced than those of his grammarian. But nobody did come, because nobody does; and under the crushing recognition of his gigantic error Jude continued to wish himself out of the world" (27). Despite the author's assertion of an ulterior influence, we can nevertheless distinguish the way in which Jude himself is responsible for his reverses of fortune. One evening, at the top of a deserted plateau, he impulsively kneels and recites Horace's "Carmen Saeculare," only to recoil at the effect which the pagan authors have had on him, "one who wished, next to being a scholar, to be a Christian divine. . . . The more he thought of it the more convinced he was of his inconsistency"

⁵ *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Irving Howe (Boston, 1965). All page references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Colby Library Quarterly 435

(29). The pattern in the events in the farmyard, with the grammars, and atop the plateau, points — Hardy's contradictory implications aside — to Jude's continuing disappointments when confronted with actual fact, and the escape from responsibility which his illusory comprehension engenders.

This clash between illusion and reality is graphically symbolized when Arabella's boar's pizzle strikes him in the midst of a reverie on the joys of becoming a bishop. Hardy's description of the onrush of passion in the nineteen-year old Jude is convincing, and his attraction to Arabella is sympathetically portrayed. Jude is soon aware, however, that she has plans to marry; his reaction in her cottage is unmistakable: "They did not belong to his set or circle, and he felt out of place and embarrassed. He had not meant this: a mere afternoon of pleasant walking with Arabella that was all he had meant" (40). Jude feels himself torn between the new dream of Arabella and the older dream, fast becoming what she later calls his "ruling passion" (247), of becoming a don at Christminster. In the midst of his indecision, he throws over his plan to study and decides to marry, "such being the custom of the rural districts." Nevertheless, he "knew well, too well, in the secret center of his brain that Arabella was not worth a great deal as a specimen of womankind. . . . For his own soothing he kept up his factitious belief in her. His idea of her was the thing of most consequence, not Arabella herself, he sometimes said laconically" (48).

This first crisis of decision confronts his desire for Arabella with the realization that (a) he is consciously ignoring the fact that she would be a bad match and (b) he is marrying not the person, but his idealization of her. Jude's perception of his own experience is thus fatally bifurcated: his desires and longings, which he considers healthy aspirations, are in fact efforts to realize fantastic goals. His reason however will not let him escape from the fact that he *knows* he has inconsistencies and that grave cracks exist in the structure of his ambitions. Jude has self-knowledge and he himself realizes this. One feels that if Hardy's intention to depict what he termed in his Preface to the first edition "fret and fever, derision and disaster" were not so rigid, that if Jude were allowed to act on his knowledge (as he might have done in Henry James, or even George Eliot) a

436 Colby Library Quarterly

more satisfying dynamic novel would result. But Hardy psychologizes just too much to have us believe that Jude is truly a pawn in the cosmic game, and we are left, if we accept Hardy's determinism, with a character too realistic to be purely allegorical and too symbolic to be totally plausible. He becomes a credible figure only when judged on the basis of his own reactions to his own experience, on his ability to risk change and grow, to learn and profit from misfortune or to adhere to simplistic and unexamined habits.

With as much self-knowledge as he has, for Jude to blame exterior forces for his plight is irresponsible. Thus, after understanding his response to Arabella⁶ and marrying her anyway, to have him (through Hardy's implication) wonder that there was "vaguely and dimly, something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a canceling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labor" (51), is to shift the blame for his misfortune from his own shoulders, to allow him to abandon control of those effects for which he was the cause, blaming instead society or "the way things are" as Sue later does (175). Hardy states that the "immediate reason of his marriage had proved to be non-existent" (52), meaning that Arabella had not been pregnant after all, while not condemning the reprehensible pretense she fabricated or Jude's irresponsible abandonment of his previous plans.

The second crisis of decision occurs at Christminster, and in the Second Part of the novel Jude's idealization of reality makes his first reactions on entering the university a true dream-sequence. For ten years he had imagined the moment of his arrival and now, at the moment of reality, his fantasy is so strong that it distorts his perception. He was imbued with the

6 "Well, it's only a bit of fun,' he said to himself, faintly conscious that to common-sense there was something lacking, and still more obviously something redundant, in the nature of this girl who had drawn him to her, which made it necessary that he should assert mere sportiveness on his part as his reason in seeking her — something in her quite antipathetic to that side of him which had been occupied with literary study and the magnificent Christminster dream. It had been no vestal who chose *that* missile for opening her attack on him. He saw this with his intellectual eye, just for a short fleeting while, as by the light of a falling lamp one might momentarily see an inscription on a wall before being enshrouded in darkness." To keep Jude from being culpable for not having resolved what was "lacking" to his "common-sense," Hardy then implies the interference of some ambiguous force: "And then this passing discriminative power was withdrawn, and Jude was lost to all conditions of things in the advent of a fresh and wild pleasure" (35).

Colby Library Quarterly 437

“breath and sentiment of the venerable city”; yet “when he passed objects out of harmony with its general expression he allowed his eyes to slip over them as if he did not see them. A bell clanging, and he listened till a hundred-and-one strokes had sounded. He must have made a mistake, he thought: it was meant for a hundred” (64). Hardy’s account of Jude’s wanderings through the streets of Christminster are almost gothic in their evocation of the influence of imagination, in the suspension of time which seems to occur, and in Jude’s “incoherent words” (65). His description of Jude himself forces us to ask if we are witnessing the influence of healthy aspiration or delusion: “Knowing not a human being here, Jude began to be impressed with the isolation of his own personality, as with a self-spectre, the sensation being that of one who walked but could not make himself seen or heard. He drew breath pensively, and, seeming thus almost his own ghost, gave his thoughts to the other ghostly presences with which the nooks were haunted” (64).

In Part Second, chapter two, comes the dissolution of the “phantasmal,” the awakening to the reality which is harsher than his “high thinkings” (67). In the morning after his vision he goes about seeking work; his illusions give way to the “more or less defective real” (68). The struggles he has sought to avoid through fantasy, the buildings themselves have suffered, as if to give the lie to his wistful vision of the city once seen from the Brown House: “there in the old walls were the broken lines of the original idea; jagged curves, disdain or precision, irregularity, disarray” (68). And then, as with Arabella, comes the moment in which the reality of Jude’s situation is brought home to him, only to be swept away by his idealization of the city of the night before: “For a moment there fell on Jude a true illumination; that here in the store yard was a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of colleges. But he lost it under the stress of his old idea” (68). Next follows Hardy’s skewing of the event to fit it into his scheme of malevolent determinism and the consequent blurring of Jude’s character by having his decision appear to be a slave of the *Zeitgeist*. He would accept the job “as a provisional thing only. This was his form of the modern vice of unrest. . . . The deadly animos-

438 Colby Library Quarterly

ity of contemporary logic and vision towards so much of what he held in reverence was not yet revealed to him" (68-69).

As before, Jude's self-knowledge is a force to be reckoned with. His intention to enter the university is being threatened by these unavoidable clashes with the *fact* of Christminster, and in response to this threat he writes to several Masters for advice; the only reply he receives advises him to follow his "true illumination." There is no basis for placing hostile connotations upon the Master's letter, as Hardy might wish to imply. The "true illumination" occurred to Jude before he received the letter and he himself had perceived it as a sound and worthwhile option, not as an occasion of despair and abandon. As with Arabella, and later with Sue, the path lies open to Jude to escape from untenable predicaments and to decide in favor of attainable goals rather than unfulfillable aims. Furthermore, he knows that he exists on two levels, one fantastic and one real, as his sporadic insights throughout the novel show: "It was not till now, when he found himself actually on the spot of his enthusiasm, that Jude perceived how far away from the object of that enthusiasm he really was" (69).

The third decision-point — to court Sue's affections — leads to the fourth and final crisis, his decision to enter the ministry. The attraction he feels for Sue is more subtle and complex than that which he felt for Arabella, but once again he is tantalized by those very factors about her which militate against a successful relationship. He begins to idealize her, masking the facts that he is married, that she is his cousin, and that his family has had a poor history of marriages, with a fantasy designed to maintain the comfort of the familiar; "she remained more or less an ideal character, about whose form he began to weave curious and fantastic day-dreams" (72). At the suggestion of his aunt that she is "townish and wanton," he rages to keep the illusion intact, telling her "Don't say anything against her, aunt! Don't, please!" (90).

As his attraction to Sue grows he has another illumination within the top of an old theatre. "He saw that his destiny lay not with these, but among the manual toilers in the shabby purlieu which he himself occupied, unrecognized as part of the city at all by its visitors and panegyrists, yet without whose denizens the hard readers could not read nor the high thinkers

Colby Library Quarterly 439

live" (94). The insight is again of something honorable, promising the self-respect of a modest craftsman instead of the frenzied search for illusory goals. When the Master's letter comes, the strength of his dream is revealed in his reaction: "This terribly sensible advice exasperated Jude. He had known all that before. He knew it was true" (95). Yet his response is not to force the moment to decision and choose between scholar and stonemason. Instead, he sloughs off the struggle and moves to Melchester, ostensibly to pursue the ministry, but actually guided there by the presence of Sue, his phantom of delight. His thoughts present this contradiction to him and he rationalizes it away. "That his excessive human interest in the new place was entirely of Sue's making, while at the same time Sue was to be regarded even less than formerly as proper to create it, had an ethical contradictoriness to which he was not blind. But that much he conceded to human frailty, and hoped to learn to love her only as a friend and kinswoman" (103).

Both crises have been met with a decision in favor of Jude's illusions and against the reality of his situation which has continually insinuated itself upon his knowledge of himself. Having his dream of Christminster destroyed contributes to the formation of a new dream, the ministry, which is itself prompted by the "phantom of the Beloved" (140). Each new illusion ignores the fulfillable aim which is continually before him, that of becoming a skilled artisan. Predictably, he buries his books in a pit and gives up the dream of entering the church. Jude's fantasies define the first half of the novel, and the second half depicts the confusion and suffering he undergoes as a result of his own ignorant indecision. Hardy is quick to portray him and Sue as struggling against evil stars, but it rather seems the fault is in themselves. The latter part of the novel is the record of the total disintegration of Jude's entire dream world and, with nothing to put in its place, it is inevitable that the work end on a note of complete negation and despair.

Noting the dissolution of his hopes, he struggles to retain them; though he would like to, he cannot ignore Sue's "colossal inconsistency" (139), her "unusual foolishness" (139), her "lack of interest in his aspirations" (141). Their move to

440 Colby Library Quarterly

Shaston is the start of Jude's long period of agonizing and wife-swapping; the town is "in itself the city of a dream" (157). Its own sinister aspects, such as the grave which is higher than the church, resemble the cracks in the real buildings of Christminster which Jude never noticed in his imaginings. Although Sue rails at "the universe" and "things in general", she is less prone to blame social convention for personal error. Speaking of Phillotson, she says "Jude, before I married him I had never fully thought out what marriage meant, even though I knew. It was idiotic of me — there is no excuse" (170). Jude, on the other hand, thinks "that the women are to blame; or is it the artificial system of things?" (171). Together "they postponed action, and seemed to live on in a dreamy paradise" (215). Their faults are entertained as insignificant emotional ripples; he rhapsodizes over his image of her, "a woman of some grand old civilization" (214), and she approves of him saying "you give way to all my whims!" (227).

Parts Five and Six of the novel thus become a Gordian knot of confused intentions, thwarted goals and obstructing illusions, and over all looms a "smarting sense of misconception" (245). The characters swing from Shelleyan exaltation to Byronic depression, and this romantic emotionalism strains the credibility of Hardy's realism as does his philosophical message.⁷ The novel's end is superbly written and crushingly pathetic, yet maintains firmly the perverse constancy of Jude's character. When he wistfully gazes at the procession of scholars through the streets and "they passed across the field of Jude's vision like inaccessible planets across an object glass" (259), one feels pity but not real sorrow, for it is apparent that the contents of his dreams were at no time accessible to him, never possibilities.

The aims Jude had were unfulfillable not because he failed to achieve them (as he himself accuses others of thinking; see p. 258), but because he consistently refused to adjust to the often unpalatable facts of his life. Criticism of *Jude the Obscure* has tended to praise Hardy's realism while acknowledging that the main causal force in Jude's life is a perplexing

⁷ Phillotson describes the spiritual union of Jude and Sue as "Shelleyan" rather than "Platonic" (183) and Sue recites from Shelley's "Eipsychidion" (194).

Colby Library Quarterly 441

combination of free will and determinism. The ambiguities of Hardy's philosophical outlook threaten the realistic portrayal of an inscrutable cosmic force. Jude's tragedy is not the result of a malevolent Will which inexorably thwarts his desires, although Hardy may have intended this. Rather, Jude's tragedy proceeds from his own refusal to recognize unattainable goals. He illustrates that pride which W. H. Auden has called "the original sin of the modern tragic hero," which consists in "the refusal to accept the limitations and weaknesses which he knows he has, the determination to become the god he is not."⁸ As Zeus says in the opening verses of the *Odyssey*,

Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame upon us gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather, who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given.⁹

⁸ W. H. Auden, ed. *The Portable Greek Reader* (New York, 1948), 23.

⁹ Richard Lattimore, trans. *The Odyssey of Homer: A Modern Translation* (New York, 1967), lines 32-34, p. 28.

