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But all in all, she will not have lived in vain, if only because Carl Weber has written this book* about her.



A NOTE ON ONE OF THOMAS HARDY'S POEMS

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IT seems to me there is a noteworthy resemblance between Thomas Hardy's description of the school children of migratory agricultural laborers in his "Dorsetshire Labourer" essay (1879) and objects in Nature compared to school children in his agnostic poem "Nature's Questioning" (*Wessex Poems*, 1898).

One of the perennial tragedies in rural England was the uprooting of these children every spring and their dazed removal and reorientation in another school as a result of their parents' will-o-the-wisp existence on the land. It is as if some scene in Nature had recalled the children of the essay to Hardy, and he had projected them in the poem metaphorically as field and flock and pool and tree of the scene that had evoked their recollection. The silence and listlessness of the children have more in common with inanimate than with animate Nature, and the contrast between the children's transience and the permanence of these natural objects emphasizes the irony. When one remembers that the agricultural laborers Hardy observed as a boy had been cowed into passivity by soldiers and by commissions of assize for their rebellion against their poverty and low wages encouraged by the Speenhamland system of outdoor relief (1795-1834), the similarity becomes even more apparent. The children in the poem are described as "chastened" by the schoolmaster, who has "cowed them till their early zest was overborne."

* *Hardy and the Lady from Madison Square*, by Carl J. Weber; with a detailed bibliography of the entire Owen Collection of Hardiana and an index. Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1952. Cloth; 264 pages. \$5.

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In the supplanting of the domestic system by the factory system, agricultural laborers had been reduced to dependence on starvation wages. A shepherd boy of Hardy's youth, whose father earned six shillings a week, died of starvation. With the increasing importance attached to money, and their parents' lower-than-subsistence wages, it was natural that these children should lose their trust in man and faith in God. They wonder about their existence and the power that is responsible for their poverty and unhappiness. One would not wish to press the analogy too far, except to suggest perhaps that their nearness to the workhouse in their daily lives and their remoteness from the factory may have something to do with their images of their creator as "some Vast Imbecility," or some "unconscious Automaton." Their question: are "We the Forlorn Hope over which Achievement strides?"—recalls Hardy's description of London with its Great Exhibition (1862) and its indifference to human welfare as "four million forlorn hopes!" The Industrial Revolution was rapidly making the lives of the rural masses like those of the town masses little more than "a sojourning existence."

Hardy has expressed emotively by his choice of images and the ebb and flow of his rhythm in the poem what he has stated factually in the essay that the melancholy of the rural poor arose from their poverty and insecurity on the land. Remembering Hardy's retrospective powers in the poetical process (in "In Time of 'the Breaking of Nations,'" for instance), one ventures to suggest that his poem "Nature's Questioning" had its roots in emotions he experienced when he observed the agricultural laborers at hiring fairs in Dorchester in the spring, "waiting upon Chance," or the farmers passing up an older and experienced shepherd for a younger and stronger man.

It is possible that a careful study of his "Dorsetshire Labourer" essay in its relation to his Wessex novels and some of his philosophical poetry might considerably illuminate Hardy's sombre view of life.