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The Dance under the Greenwood Tree: Hardy's Bucolics

HAROLD E. TOLIVER

THE FACT that Hardy returns frequently to the same bucolic themes and situations suggests not so much poverty of imagination as a problem that refuses to be permanently solved. The usual situation involves someone attempting to transcend or escape his inherited position or environment: Grace Melbury's father (in *The Woodlanders*) educates her beyond the simple needs of her environment so that to marry Giles Winterborne would be "wasting her"; Jude Fawley tries not to be "obscure"; and Michael Henchard sells his wife in order to "get ahead," which he does only to discard finally "the shabby-genteel suit of cloth and rusty silk" that stands for his rise and decline, to take up again "the old hay knife and wimble," and to go "an outcast and a vagabond" to a disinherited death in which he asks only that he not be buried in consecrated ground, that no sexton toll the bell for him, and that no man remember him. In most cases, the security and simplicity of bucolic life are forsaken for social or intellectual gains, and unhappiness nearly always results. Love triangles intensify social antagonisms into dramatic conflicts. Ethelberta, daughter of a butler, must choose between potential husbands at opposing ends of the social scale; Bathsheba Everdene (in *Far from the Madding Crowd*) is attracted both by the flashy, unstable Sergeant Troy and by shepherd Gabriel Oak, who prevents disasters and restores equilibrium to the bucolic community; Fancy Day can have Dick Dewy, Vicar Maybold, or Farmer Shiner, each representing a different level of social and economic life; Giles Winterborne could accept Marty South and remain in his own class, but

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pursues his love for Grace Melbury to the point of absurdity and even to death; and so on.

The situation of John South and Giles Winterborne is emblematic of the predicament of those who can neither be happy in the bucolic environment nor exist outside it. South cannot live with or without the tall, foreboding tree in front of his house; when it is stripped of its limbs, his fears increase and when it is cut down, he not only dies but the forested property upon which Giles depends passes out of local control. When trimming the tree, Giles calls attention to the identity of himself and his environment by shouting down to Grace, "Miss Melbury, here I am," so that her avoidance of him cannot be taken as an accident. Giles, in fact, is quick to recognize her meaning and "with a sudden start," climbs higher "into the sky, . . . cutting himself off more and more from all intercourse with the sublunary world," so he mistakenly believes. Actually, of course, he is disinheriting himself all the while, cutting himself into obscurity; trying to climb out of the sublunary world only gets him higher up in a doomed tree.

"O Giles, you've lost your dwelling-place,
And therefore, Giles, you'll lose your Grace."

And "grace" is precisely what the "winter-born" do lose. Giles ironically brings his fate upon himself, not only in the very act of pruning the tall tree in the darkness and obscure fog through which Grace, the third and final time around, can scarcely see him, but again in an obstinate act in the same fog the next day, a fog so heavy "that the morning could not penetrate the trees," when he refuses to back down a one-way road taken over by Mrs. Charmond. The fog, apparently, like the rain that gives him his death chill when he surrenders his "house" to Grace, is something like a metaphysical condition of the poor. Mrs. Charmond, who takes over his inheritance, embodies an extreme, sophisticated decadence. Her very hair is bought from Marty South, who has only this one mark of beauty which she must trade for bare subsistence. The trees, Marty thinks, "are going to keep company with my hair" (chap. v) and both, of course, are lost upon Mrs. Charmond, who in turn is lost because the hair, like the forest,

is not vitally "hers." Each party is dissatisfied with its own properties, but no transfer will solve the problem.

The recurring dilemma, then, is that the desire to escape bucolic life does not in itself create a place to escape to. Poverty, ennui, isolation, and rootlessness circumscribe one's possibilities. If a "native" does manage to leave, he returns; and if he returns, like Clym Yeobright, with hopes of establishing an ideal and intellectually advanced bucolic community, he will be disillusioned. Intellectual elevation and peasantry are simply not compatible:

In passing from the bucolic to the intellectual life the intermediate stages are usually two at least, frequently many more; and one of these stages is almost sure to be worldly advance. We can hardly imagine bucolic placidity quickening to intellectual aims without imagining social aims as the transitional phase. Yeobright's local peculiarity was that in striving at high thinking he still cleaved to plain living—nay, wild and meagre living in many respects, and brotherliness with clowns (*The Return of the Native*, III, ii).

Clym is a "John the Baptist" who takes "ennoblement rather than repentance for his text" and Hardy's view of the matter is perhaps best indicated by the use of the words *placidity* and *clowns*. Clym ends, not a prophet, but a maimed "priest" without a theology or a congregation. Thomasin rejects the idea of marrying a gentleman and living a city life for the less ambitious and sounder idea of marrying Diggory Venn and remaining in the country. The natives are largely oblivious, at least to Yeobright, and none but natives are happy.

The 1895-1902 preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (like the 1895 preface to *The Return of the Native*) shows Hardy's awareness of having idealized the Wessex country despite an attempt to locate the novel in a real geographic setting. The way of life he had described, he says, belonged to a "partly dream-country" which never existed quite as it was portrayed. But even in his early novel the life of the shepherd and farmer is minutely and realistically described; Hardy gives precise details for everything from intricate operations for bloat to lambing, shearing, and sheep washing, which qualifies considerably the idyllic atmosphere of the shepherd and his flute. "Love" is not a romantic flirtation in the meadow, but something requiring arduous effort:

Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all)

when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality (chap. lvi).

And the final commentary by Joseph Poorgrass is anything but radiantly joyful: "But since 'tis as 'tis, why, it might have been worse, and I feel my thanks accordingly."

On the other hand, if Hardy's peasants lack sensitivity, as William Matchett believes,¹ and if their idyllic life fades away into an illusive vision under close scrutiny, they are also free of artificial social codes that distort natural human behavior. Their good sense often punctures the pretensions of the more highly situated, as in the elderly man's view of Christminster as a place where "they raise pa'sons . . . like radishes in a bed," or in Robert Creedle's homespun analysis of what, to the principal actors, is an overly serious and trying situation:

At present Mrs. Fitzpiers can lead the doctor as your 'mis'ess could lead you. . . . She's got him quite tame. . . . I happened to be setting a wire on the top of my garden one night when he met her on the other side of the hedge; and the way she queened it, and fenced, and kept that poor feller at a distance was enough to freeze yer blood (*Woodlanders*, chap. xlviii).

Should Tess follow her mother's country advice, Angel Clare would never know of her "Bygone Trouble": why should she trumpet her indiscretions "when others don't trumpet theirs?" Unfortunately, she possesses just enough spontaneity and animal feelings to attract trouble and enough idealism to have it ruin her, being, as Clare ruefully says, "a new-sprung child of nature" and "the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy!" (chap. xxxv). A Cainy Ball, an Abel Whittle, or a Car Darch has no fear of the "President of the Immortals," cares nothing for melioration, and knows nothing of a blind Immanent Will. Strength and resignation are as vitally part of the peasants as obtuseness. Their speech is natural, humorous, and lively, while the dialogue of the main characters is often stiff and unwieldy. Hardy's sympathies cannot finally be placed exclusively with one or the other, which is perhaps why they clash so frequently.

¹"*The Woodlanders*, or Realism in Sheep's Clothing," *NCF*, IX (1955), 255.

In the light of this recurring dilemma, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, the first novel to explore it, assumes an added importance. Because of this, I should like to examine it in some detail. It is usually thought to be a slight, "delightful pastoral," not particularly noteworthy or meaningful.² John F. Danby, however, has boldly asserted that "already in 1872 it says as much as Hardy will ever be able to say, and maybe in a form more satisfactory than any he later devised."³ Probably something between these two extremes is more nearly just. *Greenwood Tree* does indeed adumbrate much that will be put less perfectly later, but its analysis of the rustic community offers rather a starting point than a defining pattern. Dick Dewy and Fancy Day are young and immature compared to later protagonists, and the texture of the novel is thin compared to that of *The Woodlanders*, *Tess*, or any of the major novels that come later. As John Holloway has shown, Hardy grows only gradually disillusioned with bucolic life, discovering ultimately that the earlier way of life in rural England simply "did not possess the inner resources upon which to make a real fight for its existence. The old order was not just a less powerful mode of life than the new, but ultimately helpless before it through inner defect."⁴ The *Greenwood Tree* in its diminutive way shows the beginnings and hints at the end of this "fight for existence" which the "dream-country" is to lose partly because it cannot survive critical examination and cannot satisfy the whole, intelligent man. It quietly suggests reasons for later protagonists leaving the dance under the tree for the more strenuously intellectual quests of higher education, professional pursuits, and social gains. It also implies reasons why these quests fail, why Eustacia Vye holds mummers and mumming in great contempt, and why the "dance" itself in *Tess* becomes an occasion which exposes the selfishness and rudeness of the low people of Trantridge, turning them into "satyrs clasping nymphs." It makes these suggestions obliquely, being concerned chiefly for the side of things opposite from that of the later novels; if isolation and exile from the community are main themes of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess*, and *Jude*, the

² See, e.g., Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (New York, 1958), pp. 289-290; Albert J. Guerard, *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), p. 48.

³ Danby, "Under the Greenwood Tree," *Critical Quarterly*, I (1959), 5.

⁴ "Hardy's Major Fiction," *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*, eds. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 235.

community and its binding ceremonies form the center of the *Greenwood Tree*.⁵

But the community of Mellstock possesses flaws and the novel is devoted also to examining them as they are revealed by the life and manners of the people, especially of the choir. The choir is the chief symbol for an old order which, since ancient times, has bound the individual members of the community in a loose and varied unity. It occupies the center of the church and governs the “harmony” of the communal music. The new and more efficient vicar, at the insistence of Farmer Shiner, a moderately wealthy man of gold studs, a silver watch chain, and an ostentatious ring, desires to do away with it “neck and crop” and to replace it with an organ, which is to be played by Fancy Day. With the passing of the choir, Hardy writes somewhat nostalgically in the 1896 preface, “an important union of interests has disappeared.” Parson Maybold, with his courageous eyes, timid mouth, and neutral nose, is bold enough to correct outdated parish customs, but not bold enough to withstand Shiner’s proposal or to save the “union of interests.”

Fancy attracts the outward eye and disrupts the inner harmony of the community at large and of Dick Dewy in particular, whose family illustrates several stages of entrance into the new social order while being the center of the old one. Grandfather Williams would “starve to death for music’s sake,” and Reuben is only slightly less involved in music. Farmer Shiner, on the other hand, has no real love for music and no more ear than a “chair.” Hardy skillfully syncretizes the two main elements of the plot, the breaking up of the Dewys’ choir at the instigation of Shiner and the marriage of Fancy and Dick Dewy, by making Shiner and Maybold interested parties in both actions and by frequent cross referencing. (The day of the choir’s displacement, for example, sees Fancy’s daring curls and feather hat first distracting Dick, since he cannot be in church to see her performance and they therefore cannot be for him, then distracting the members of the choir, who see her from their unaccustomed, scattered places in the depth of the church, and finally attracting Maybold, who is overly happy to have her beside him.)

Hardy thus finds a natural symbol for the progress of communal disorder in the history and “imagery” of the choir. In the younger

⁵ Cf. Danby, p. 6.

generation's disrespect for the singers is a graphic example of the central conflict, one element surging "upwards" as the gallery group plunges "downwards":

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-girls' 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.

Now this had never happened before within the memory of man. The girls, like the rest of the congregation, had always been humble and respectful followers of the gallery . . . never interfering with the ordinances of these practised artists—having no will, union, power, or proclivity except it was given them from the established choir enthroned above them (I, vi).

The fiddles are finally laid down and the music given over to the "brazen faced hussies," who represent an organized disorganization next to chaos, a weird modern "dance" replacing the traditional one with its ordinances and "practised" artistry. "Shall anything saucier be found than united 'ooman?" Mr. Spinks wonders. Their interference is also a violation of a loose social hierarchy. The "ancients" built the galleries for superior musicians, not for "people down in the lowest depths of the church." Only the "initiated" understand the full import of the situation and the "horrible bitterness of irony that lurked under the quiet words 'useless ones,' and the ghastliness of the laughter apparently so natural" that Spinks utters.

It would be inaccurate, of course, taking the choir's self-estimation at face value, to say that the music and dance of the old group is perfectly or inherently graceful. On the contrary, the members of the choir are clearly amateur fiddlers more at home at a country gathering than in church. They may represent a disappearing idyllic order, but their clumsiness and crudity, as much as the opposition of new ideas, cause the disintegration of the old ways. Fancy Day, like most of the younger generation, sees their faults clearly, especially those which Dick Dewy possesses. Vicar Maybold at least owns an umbrella.

The gradual unfolding of the ambiguity of the old ways, crude

and yet ingratiating, and the new ways, self-seeking and yet efficient and cultured, forms the chief structural development of the novel. It coincides with Dick's progress towards marriage and Fancy's progress towards the center of the church as organist and as bride. The first section (winter) is devoted to describing the nature of the old communal life and its underlying flaws, beginning with an account of the harmony between man and nature:

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality (I, i).

The seasons change but the music endures, and Dick Dewy makes his own contribution to the general harmony singing in a "rural cadence,"

"With the rose and the lily
And the daffodowndilly,
The lads and the lasses a-sheep-shearing go."

And as he walks, others of the choir add their "shuffling, halting, irregular footsteps" to his, each a discrete, "irregular" individual, but contributing to the unity of Mellstock by participating in the choir. The assembled group finds in making its rounds, however, that "times have changed from the times they used to be," especially since "barrel-organs, and the things next door to 'em that you blow wi' your foot, have come in terribly of late years" (I, iv). If their songs, "transmitted from father to son through several generations" stress communal harmony, they are nevertheless sometimes met with silence or even by violent opposition. Outside Fancy's darkened schoolhouse, Dick's father, Reuben, momentarily fears that she has "jist come from some musical city, and sneers at our doings," which is not quite right, but not entirely wrong. She does, however, put in an appearance, illuminated by a candle and dressed in a white robe, and is ironically taken by Reuben to be "As near a thing to a spiritual vision as ever *I* wish to see!" (cf. IV, v). This misplaced worship, shared by Dick, is foreboding, but running head-on against Farmer Shiner in his "queer lump of a house," if a more prosaic contribution to the general dishar-

mony, is equally threatening: "Shut up, woll'ee! Don't make your blaring row here!" In the humorous and symbolic struggle of each to outshout the other ("play fortissimy, and drown his spaking!"), all are losers.

The clash of "new" with "old" takes place on several levels. For one thing, the new ways are more secular, at least in the eyes of the choir; the new instruments are hostile to country religion: "If you'd thrive in musical religion, stick to strings, says I." Fancy has the appearance of an angel by candlelight, but is only fancy by daylight. Farmer Shiner's behavior Reuben attributes to "his worldly frame"; he is a better man "in his religious frame." But mainly a simple and clear-cut incompatibility causes the rift: the choir simply cannot maintain the interest and respect of the whole community. In the secular frame of the "wild" dance at Reuben Dewy's house, Fancy's power over Dick increases as Hardy shows the customs of the new group to be more artificial but more influential than those of the older group. Some of the warmer dancers, for example, shed their coats according to the old custom that allows natural behavior, but Dick "fearing to lose ground in Fancy's good opinion," retains his, as Shiner does also "from superior knowledge." The established customs among the older group, which tend to offer a basis for settling disagreements, are ignored or openly contested by the better-informed. The first section ends with Dick's embarrassed visit to the school to return Fancy's handkerchief and with the real beginning of the courtship. "Not being an experienced lover" of the urban kind, he is awkward and totally unable to read the signs on his "Angel's" countenance.

Section two (spring) depicts both the budding of the love affair and the corresponding decline of the choir. The interrelations of the two plots may be inferred from the simple juxtaposition of episodes and from the minute realism with which the community life gradually unfolds. Dick becomes a "lost man" as the choir and what it stands for becomes a lost cause, Fancy being instrumental to both actions. As he falls out of step, the choir goes together to an interview with the vicar (an interview which Dick leaves to visit Fancy's school), faintly resembling "a flock of sheep," the regular tramp of their "united feet" turning to an awkward "shuffling and jostling" in his presence. Maybold grants till Michaelmas or so before the choir must give way "for the next gen-

eration," but there is some truth and much bitterness in part of the choir's reaction to the decision: "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" (II, v). In their displacement, as Spinks sees it, the hierarchy has been exactly reversed.

The middle sections of the novel are devoted primarily to exploring the meaning and effects of Fancy Day. Her taciturn father, Geoffrey, is curiously divided and enigmatic; his household down to his misshapen boots and the windowpanes is distorted and divided: "his face was fissured rather than wrinkled" and all the furniture, even the clocks, is duplicated. He values position and property, as those of the new generation tend to do more than the old, but he is honest, even wrongheaded, rather than subtle and grasping. He still does business with "Mr. Penny," who has no sign over his shoe shop, feeling like other owners of old establishments that advertising is far beneath his dignity. As far as Dick Dewy is concerned, he is the most formidable obstacle to uniting different social and economic levels in marriage. Courting must be carried on secretly until he can be prepared. It is his embarrassing question "do ye think after this that you be good enough for her?" that seemingly guarantees a divisive social stratification in a community which Spinks has already indicated to be alien to him: rather than join the general harmony, he lapses into silence: "That man's dumbness is wonderful to listen to," Spinks says with some irony. "There's so much sense in it. Every moment of it is brimmen over wi' sound understanding!" (II, v). The members of his household are also divided, the trapper, Enoch, dining separately but within hearing of the main table, and Mrs. Day possessing both strange vagaries and common sense. She, like Fancy, is entirely taken up with appearances at times and with what people will "say" about her; she has an ability stronger than "doom" to get a husband, but she cannot make a harmonious household. Taken together, the family is a faction stationed on the edge of Mellstock, ready to separate or to be incorporated. It is significant that the final "dance" is held on Geoffrey Day's premises with his daughter and his tree at the center of the reunited community.

By summer (part three) the ripening love has assumed a dominant position, and the choir, having served its symbolic purpose, falls into the background momentarily. Dick and Fancy become

engaged, and the focus shifts to Fancy's own dilemma, which requires her to overcome the financial-minded opposition of her father and her own desire for social position. She vacillates between vanity and a sincere attempt to become more acceptable as Dewy's future wife. The nutting episode reveals the profoundness of the clash between the old uniting ceremonies which Dick follows and Fancy's divisive concern for individual finery. The honey-taking episode, likewise concerning an ancient bucolic task, reveals the ineptness of Shiner in dealing with the bees, which Geoffrey Day handles in a practical but ceremonious and respectful way. While Day makes it plain that social levels are more completely separated than Dick had suspected, there is obviously a higher degree of concord between the Dewys and the Days than between Shiner and either family. When Fancy nearly abandons Dick for the vicar, the community threatens to fall into two nearly opposed groups, the cultural and economic "haves" and "have-nots"; but the bonds nevertheless hold. She eventually keeps her promise and even consents to follow old marriage customs when they conflict with new ideas of propriety.

The last section skips over winter to the time when winter emerges into spring, thus breaking the loose parallel of the plot and the seasons in which Fancy's "ambition and vanity" nearly lead to a winter's semitragedy. The rhythmic integration of the communal life and nature remains unbroken, however: in this season, people go to bed among nearly naked trees and awake among green ones. The conclusion reveals an uneasy compromise between new and old elements, a compromise in which each part of the community joins in its own way the dance under the ancient greenwood tree in Yalbury wood. Geoffrey makes an attempt to join the festivities, covering his "new nether garments" under a week-day apron and allowing Leaf, who throughout the novel has offered the supreme test of social cohesiveness, to remain in the group. Even the clock by Thomas Wood is removed, the last sign of fissure, "Ezekiel Saunder being at last left the sole referee in matters of time." There are some constraints that did not exist in the days before Fancy, constraints that are inherent in her family, but considerably fewer under the tree than in the newly "religious" church:

The propriety of every one was intense, by reason of the influence of

Fancy, who, as an additional precaution in this direction had strictly charged her father and the tranter to carefully avoid saying 'thee' and 'thou' in their conversation, on the plea that those ancient words sounded so very humiliating to persons of newer taste; also that they were never to be seen drawing the back of the hand across the mouth after drinking—a local English custom of extraordinary antiquity, but stated by Fancy to be decidedly dying out among the better classes of society (V, ii).

The knot perhaps cannot be untied, but it has been tied rather loosely and so the community itself is rather more accidentally together than "one." The older persons are seated in a group under the tree, "the space being allotted to them somewhat grudgingly by the young ones, who were greedy of pirouetting room" and they are "fortified by a table against the heels of the dancers." The new dance, aided by the professional tambourine player from another town, is obviously not entirely of their choosing, but better than nothing; they would rather be separated and protected from it by the table than try to control it or take part in it. Fancy herself looks as matronly as possible after only six hours of matrimony, and yet she retains, too, her flirtatious glances. The new couple has as much chance of marital happiness as any, provided they are not "too poor to have time to sing."

But they are not so "exactly in tune with one another" as Mrs. Dewy believes. The measure of discord between them hints at the tenuous nature of the compromise between two ways of life that will increasingly pull bucolic protagonists in opposite directions. The succeeding works of Hardy are luminous with symbols of the struggle and the obscurity in which it sooner or later ends. The "humblest dwelling of the humble" in which Henchard dies, attended only by Abel Whittle, is perhaps as appropriate a single image as we should find for it (chap. vi), but the significantly half-blinded Clym Yeobright, bidding Eustacia to go alone to the festival dance, is more fully and strikingly articulate:

You have all my heart yet, I believe; and because you bear with me, who am in truth a drag upon you, I owe you thanks. Yes, go alone and shine. As for me, I will stick to my doom. At that kind of meeting people would shun me. My hook and gloves are like the St. Lazarus rattle of the leper, warning the world to get out of the way of a sight that would sadden them (IV, iii).