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JOSEPH CONRAD AND THOMAS HARDY

By H. E. Bates

THE placing together of Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad in the lineage of English novelists leads me at once to two reflections. First, that although their lives cover very nearly the same period of time, in a century when the English novel is popularly supposed to have been at its greatest, their work in tone and artistry and feeling and setting belongs not only to different centuries but almost to different worlds, Hardy's to a world that often seems to us as unreal and dated and strange as a Victorian fashion-plate, Conrad's to a world as unreal and strange in a vastly different sense but as undated as the sea and the stars and the sunlight of which he wrote so well. And secondly, that although the English are known and have been renowned for centuries both as a nation of seafarers and sea-lovers and as men lovingly and necessarily preoccupied with the earth, a nation in whose development seamen and farmers have played an immense part, English literature can show only two writers of classic substance whose work has for its foundation the soil and the sea. Why this should be I do not pretend to know and it is not within the scope of this essay to prove. It may be a mere coincidence that Hardy is alone in his position as the novelist of English rural life and that Conrad as a novelist of the sea has no one to rival him but

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Marryat. But if it is, then it is one of the oddest coincidences in English literature. For the sea and the land between them must have inspired more English poets than any other subjects except women and love and flowers. Nor is it that English prose, or more especially the English novel, is barren of all reference to earth and sea; but only that we have no dramatic novelist except Conrad occupied entirely with the sea, and no novelist of the same calibre as Hardy occupied, even though not quite so entirely, with the drama of English rural life and character.

This point is, I think, worth making; for with the exception of one other characteristic, a point of greater importance to which I will refer in a moment, Hardy and Conrad have little in common. Born in 1840, Hardy was confined from that very moment to the moment of his death nearly a century later by the boundaries of an age in which morality played a larger part in literature than ever before or since. The England that Hardy knew was supercharged with a consciousness of right and wrong; and Hardy, though the rights and wrongs of his characters were on a higher plane and were seen from his own refined and ennobled viewpoint, was supercharged with that consciousness too. He could hardly help it, but it made him and to my mind has kept him, in spite of his occasional greatness, a provincial writer. Born in 1857, only a little later, Conrad never suffered from the confines of morality or time or place. He is not provincial, but cosmopolitan. It is not that his range of character was any greater than Hardy's, or that in mere verbal dexterity and passionate intensity he had Hardy beaten into a cocked hat, but simply that there is in him a basic difference in make-up, mobility of mind and range of moral attitude. It is the difference between chalk and cheese, between a man of one nationality and another, between

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the sardonic Englishman and the sardonic Pole. Hardy is so much the Englishman that we do not need to think of it; we take it for granted. Whereas Conrad gets extra credit for the romantic fact of his nationality, for being the Pole who learnt English and mastered it and finally wrote novels in it. In this sense Conrad starts with an advantage over Hardy. He himself was a romantic figure; Hardy was never romantic. Conrad was the adventurer; Hardy the home-bird. But these are slight differences compared with the difference in blood, the difference which makes one animal a race-horse and another a cart-horse, the difference which in fact made Conrad an aristocrat and Hardy scarcely as high as middle-class. Looking at Conrad's portraits, reading his life, analysing his novels, it is difficult to imagine him as anything but the aristocrat, as a man in some exalted position, a being of refined instincts and intelligence and sensibility. It requires no imagination to see Conrad as a diplomat, a refined connoisseur, a high official, an artist. Whereas with Hardy it is hard to imagine him as being even remotely connected with art and refinement at all; with that curious, stunted shrewd figure he might have been a clerk, a shopkeeper, a saddler, a shoemaker, a local preacher, a newsagent, or in fact the stonemason that he once was.

And just as one cannot escape these differences in the men themselves, so one is constantly confronted with them in the novels. Hardy is the cart-horse, Conrad the race-horse, and appropriately Hardy's novels seem to me to resemble in form and progress and solidity those big, splendidly built but laborious wagons which must have been so common in his day, wagons heavily laden with goods and going on long journeys and made to resist the conflict of time and circumstance. On the other hand, the work of Conrad, verbose though it is, moves more

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swiftly, far more beautifully, and at infinitely higher blood-pressure. His novels are like the spirited courses of a sensitive animal, passionate, intense, fiery, graceful, all that a fine animal in a race can be. By contrast Hardy stumbles along, halting often, stopping at inns on the roadside, his eye on the weather, picking up characters, philosophizing, taking an unconscionable time to get to his destination, but getting there at last.

So the catalogue of their dissimilarities might go on. Moreover, as large a catalogue of differences would be inevitable were Hardy to be replaced by almost any other English novelist, for English novelists are apt to be very English, where Conrad is the elusive cosmopolitan figure of no nationality at all. Conrad may be likened to no other English novelist except, inevitably, Marryat. But there are many similarities between, for instance, Hardy and Meredith, and we are already familiar with the similarities between Hardy and George Eliot, similarities which provoked that remark of cruel truth—"Hardy is one of George Eliot's many miscarriages"—for which George Moore is famous. True, similarities between Hardy and Conrad are by no means non-existent, even though they happen to be virtues which either might share with any other great novelist of their time. Both are philosophers, both ironists, both tragedians, both remorseless. The characters of them both are meant to be cast in heroic mould, though it is the relentless mould of time and fate which finally shapes them, with the result that their characters are in reality not heroes at all, but victims. Especially in Hardy are they victims. But none of these things are technical virtues, none of them are part of the novelist's craft. And in one respect, a technical aspect, Hardy and Conrad are equally remarkable. They are both masters of atmosphere.

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Atmosphere is the second in importance of all the novelist's virtues. It is certainly greater in importance than plot; and there are times when it may play an even more important part than character. Character, we know, is plot, but atmosphere may be even more. It is true that characters may emanate their own atmosphere, as flowers give off their scents. But the character that gives off no atmosphere of its own and has none supplied by its creator is as flat and lifeless as a sheet of paper. There are, I imagine, recipes for character; there are certainly recipes for plots; but there is no recipe for the creation of atmosphere, for the subtle evocation of the breath, sound, silence, colour and even the taste of scenes and moods, an art in which both Hardy and Conrad excelled. The atmosphere of their novels has an astonishingly enduring and even haunting quality. When the motives and emotions of the characters in *The Return of the Native* have become confused and hard to recall and even meaningless, the brooding air of Egdon Heath, captured in the single first paragraph of the book, remains as powerfully in the mind as ever. And when the name of every character in *The Woodlanders* has been forgotten, the lovely pastoral air of the book endures like a breath of a summer. Similarly, but perhaps even more remarkably, with Conrad: the heat of tropical sunlight, the tranquillity of a warm night at sea, the exoticism of strange islands, the beauty of the sea itself, the mystery and enchantment of remote places—all these lie far more securely in the mind than the actions and sufferings and even the fates of even Conrad's remarkably enduring characters. Mr Desmond MacCarthy once remarked that, though it had been perhaps twenty-five or thirty years since he had read the novels of Turgenev, their perfectly realized and sustained lyricism of atmosphere remained as freshly in his

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mind as ever. And here, for me, more than half the greatness of both Conrad and Hardy lies. In this respect they are both masters, controlling and using to the full effect the most precious of the novelist's instincts—the subtle evocation of the atmosphere of their chosen worlds.

And what oddly opposed worlds they are—what worlds of difference there are between them! Conrad may be said to have been the poet of magical horizons, Hardy the surveyor of the whole Victorian system of morality and the architecture of the soul. Conrad is the dreamer, Hardy the builder. To Conrad plot was nothing, to Hardy it was everything. In Hardy it is what the characters do or have done to them by fate that is important; in Conrad it is not what the characters do but what they afterwards feel and think and suffer. Hardy is the accomplished—far too accomplished—novelist of fatalistic coincidence, Conrad the novelist of chance. In the works of both the dice is loaded; but whereas in Conrad we have the impression that fate has loaded it, in Hardy we feel that although fate is *supposed* to have loaded it, the loading has in reality been done by Hardy himself.

Take *Tess*—almost the only novel of Hardy's in which a single character is great enough to transcend the too-crushing mechanisms of plot. *Tess* has for its sub-title *A Pure Woman*. Why? Why this careful preliminary emphasis on purity? Why this laboured attempt on Hardy's part to establish *Tess* as an emblem of chastity before the book begins? Obviously it is, I think, because the dice is loaded before the book begins, and that Hardy knows only too well that it is loaded for the simple reason that he has loaded it himself. *Tess* was not only doomed in the book but—in Hardy's day at any rate—doomed outside it too. Poor *Tess*!—she was victimized both ways, by Hardy on the one side and by Victorian England on

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the other. With *Tess* the cry is not '*Tis Pity she's a Whore!* but '*Tis Pity she is Pure!* And Hardy knew that—he knew that whatever he might think, Victorian England would think the opposite. *Tess* for him might be the purest of the pure, but for the Victorians that very purity was the secret of the trouble. A wanton labelled wanton, yes—but not a wanton labelled pure.

But today *Tess* is neither pure nor wanton. Why indeed should she be? Her little misdeed, on which after all the whole book depends, arouses in the modern reader no feelings of moral outrage or disgust. Why is it? *Tess* herself has not changed, the printed word remains as Hardy left it. But clearly there is a change somewhere, and clearly it must be either in us or in contemporary standards of morality. And since we are asked to judge *Tess* by standards of purity the change is clearly in morality itself. Morality in fact has done some quick-change tricks since Hardy's day, so that what was moral for him and immoral for his readers may have, and in fact has, a totally different aspect and meaning for us.

Which brings us at once to the great defect in Hardy's make-up as a novelist. Living in the heart of an age where morality was the great watchword he may perhaps be excused for not having rumbled morality, for not seeing that morality, as a fixed entity, does not really exist, that it is really nothing but a fashion, which changes from one year to another, from one country to another, from one place to another, and more especially from one person to another, as surely as the fashion and taste in hats or furniture. Morality is virtually a fraud, since there is really no stabilized coinage of morality at all but only the elemental currency of human action and re-action, only human conduct and its consequences. In championing *Tess* as pure, Hardy was committing, as a novelist, just as

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grave an error as those who condemned her as a wanton. For it is not the novelist's business to champion at all, any more than it is his business to judge. His job is to create and interpret. Shakespeare does not champion Desdemona, nor does he give *Othello* the title of *Desdemona: a Pure Woman*, though he might have felt every bit as justified as Hardy in doing so. He creates and interprets, and manages also to do something else for which there is no recipe: he touches us to tears of pity. But for Hardy mere creation and interpretation was not enough. He must come boldly out on the side of purity. He took up, in fact, a Moral Attitude. With the inevitable result that we wonder today what all the fuss was about. We are no longer scandalized or outraged by Tess's behaviour, and it is only by some intangible and touching quality of greatness in Tess herself that we are moved to any emotions resembling pity at all.

This peculiar quality in Tess, recognized by many writers but never really explained, brings us up at once against the question of plot. For Tess is the one major character in the whole range of Hardy's varied and often impossible characters who transcends the elaborate architecture of the plots, who is doomed yet who in some strange way escapes and lives on beyond her doom and the pages of the book. "Tess", as Mr E. M. Forster has very well said, "conveys the feeling that she is greater than destiny." This is so true, and Mr Forster then proceeds to discuss the question of Hardy's plots so well that I cannot resist quoting him a second time:

Hardy arranges events with emphasis on causality, the ground plan is a plot, and the characters are ordered to acquiesce to its requirements. . . . His characters are involved in various snares, they are finally bound hand and foot, there is a ceaseless emphasis on fate, and yet for all the sacrifices made to it, we never see the action as a living thing as we see it in *Bernice* or *Antigone* or *The Cherry Orchard*.

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This hits the mark, but I would go even further and say that it is that very emphasis on causality, that ceaseless emphasis on fate, and that constant elaborated building-up of plot and the subordination of everything to it that has made Hardy, in many ways, a second-class writer. When George Moore made his now famous indictment of Hardy as a second-class writer the world was scandalized. Yet it was very true. Technically, in spite of that genius for the creation of atmosphere, Hardy can at times be the biggest bungler with words in the whole history of the novel. The latinized, slow-moving prose reaches its worst depths in such phrases, common on every page, as the "spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light", "a domiciliary intimacy", "equinoctial darkness", "a pulsating flexuous domesticity". Thousands of grandiose wasted words lie along Hardy's path as a novelist. Living in an age that adored elaborations he wrote for it as though he were saying to himself, "I have profound works to write. The longer and more elaborate the words I use the more profound I shall seem to be."

Oddly enough, that overburdened prose now creates the entirely opposite effect, an effect of something pompous and meretricious. Hardy seems far more profound when using the far simpler idioms of poetry. His knotty little poems are in fact his choicest works—the sharp little nuts of his own autumn, tense and bitterly flavoured with the refined salt of his irony. As a novelist, however, he suffers much from having to carry the burden of precisely those characteristics by which he was once judged to be great. His plots and his prose have revenged themselves upon him completely.

Not so with Conrad. In the first place Conrad set no emphasis on plot. Character and atmosphere to Conrad were everything, plot nothing. Secondly, though he is

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a verbose writer and sometimes a trying writer, his verbosity is on another plane from Hardy's, a higher and rarer plane altogether. It is a new and gorgeous verbosity. It is the sublime verbosity of the poet, where Hardy's is only the verbosity of the long-winded local preacher out to impress his hearers by mere length and weight of words, regardless of whether they understand them or not. Hardy did his best to impress us by a philosophically weighted style that now seems, at its worst, about as alive as a stuffed elephant, but Conrad set out to impress us, and did impress us, by words that were like paint, by a style that was daubed on the page with prodigious liberality, in gorgeous and sombre overtones, the sort of style which in fact had never been seen in English literature before and has never been seen since.

It was in fact the style of a foreigner. Conrad, for all his command of English, could not escape his blood. The English are constantly being taunted for their fear of showing their emotions, but Conrad never qualified for that gibe. His novels are as supercharged with emotion as the Victorian age was supercharged with its sense of right and wrong—a sense which, as it happens, never troubled Conrad the novelist very much. Not for Conrad the vexed question of the purity or impurity of heroines. It was enough for him that women were flesh and blood—a fact that happened also to have been good enough for Shakespeare and Defoe. Who ever troubled about the purity of Moll Flanders or Cleopatra? Certainly not their creators. In their day the milk of virginity was worth little or nothing; by Hardy's day it was at a premium; but by Conrad's day the price was slumping again.

It must be remembered that although only seventeen years separate the births of Hardy and Conrad, Hardy had

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almost finished writing when Conrad began. *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad's first book, and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's last, were both published in 1895. And between that date and the date of *Desperate Remedies*, twenty-five years earlier, many things had happened to change not only the social and moral fabric of life but the whole fabric of the novel too. Among other things Samuel Butler had delivered his two-handed solar-plexus punch called *The Way of All Flesh*, a punch that knocked more wind out of the moralists and more wind into the literature of its time than any other book had done for ages. After Butler things had to be different. And somehow morality never got its wind back, and by an odd coincidence the novel was never quite so windy again.

Not that I would connect Butler with Conrad. But Butler marks a new era, and it was an era in which Conrad happens to be a singular and even a great light. *Jude* is the end of a phase; *Almayer* the beginning of one. With these books the novel became less discursive and more pictorial; it placed less importance on moral issues and more on the elemental clash of human conflict regardless of moral right or wrong; it became more closely allied with painting and farther and farther away from architecture. In short, a thing of altogether brighter colouring, more graceful lines and of infinitely higher temperature.

And with Conrad it reached also new phases in emotional development. With Conrad we are done with the cart-horse. We are concerned instead with a creature of pulsating blood and high emotional spirit. Verbose though Conrad is, his prose moves at great pace, at an almost explosive pressure that is at its best sublime and poetic in its intensity. Words take on fresh rhythms and a grandeur of colour and odour that is intoxicating. Light and darkness and sunlight and sea and the brooding air of

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tropical forests are used with magnificent dexterity to heighten and enrich and throw their light on character.

For we have done with more than the cart-horse. We have done with the old emphasis on plot and on causality. Character and atmosphere have become supreme in importance. The Hardy-esque trick-drama of coincidence dovetailing into coincidence has been replaced by the natural and freer and more noble drama of man against the elements. The dice is still loaded, but not unfairly loaded. And if the emphasis is still inclined to be on fate, it is a fate controlled by something higher and finer than the marionette wires that Hardy pulled but pretended not to pull.

So one could go on analysing and analysing. But when the dissecting and analysis are finished, what is the true test of a novel? It seems to me that the great test is the test of remembrance; in other words, the test of time. The novel whose scenes and meanings fade into insignificance can hardly be reckoned great. *Wuthering Heights*, analysed and judged by technical standards, is a bad novel; but it persists vividly in the mind as a great experience. Dickens, says Mr E. M. Forster again, ought to be bad, but somehow he is good. Micawber and company are as flat as pancakes, but in spite of that they persist with us. Defoe is among the greatest of novelists because of an eternally unfading quality of his scenes and people. Who ever forgets Robinson Crusoe?

And what is it we remember of Conrad and Hardy? Is it, with Hardy, the elaborate architecture of the plots, the heavy philosophy which he must have thought an indispensable part of a serious novel, the laborious working-out of the problems? Not at all. Somehow they have faded, and what we remember instead are those scenes in which Hardy cut the cackle and came to the horses: the

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terrific scene of the pig-sticking in *Jude the Obscure*, the harrowing pictures of Tess half-frozen in the turnip-field, the auction of the wife in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and so on. Judged by these Hardy is great. But there are few, far too few such scenes to compare with them. Whereas in Conrad, since the main emphasis is on the pictorial, whole books, not merely scenes, rise up in vivid remembrance. I find it difficult to remember the exact plots of *Lord Jim* or *Almayer*, but I see the whole panorama of the tropics and recapture the tense existence of the characters spontaneously. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is the record of a man and a voyage, and though I have not read the book for almost ten years, its scenes and portraits rise up before me with the clarity and brilliance of fresh-daubed paint. In Hardy we read a prodigious number of dead words before encountering a living scene. With Conrad the books themselves are living scenes.

It is, in fact, Conrad who survives the test. It is very ennobling, no doubt, to be a novelist with a mission, to feel that since there are wrongs to set right it is your duty to set them right, to champion the purity of young ladies against the revilings of an age with whom you do not see eye to eye on questions of illegitimacy, to set great moral problems and solve them, to be the novelistic voice crying in the wilderness. The only thing is that, ennobling though it may be, the work of such writers rarely seems to survive. The great causes of one age have an unhappy knack of becoming rather silly in the next. All honour to the novelist who lashes his age, but he must not mind if to the age that comes after him he seems to be beating a dead donkey. Dickens is almost the sole surviving novelist with a purpose, and he survives not because of his purposes but in spite of them. So it is with the novelist

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who shocks the world in his own day; what shocked his contemporaries often seems as mild as milk to posterity.

There are, in short, writers who date and writers who remain as fresh as daisies. And for that very good reason I have no hesitation in putting my money on Conrad. Hardy already dates, but Conrad, neither prophet nor moralist, neither propagandist nor champion of causes, triumphs as fresh as ever. And if I do not call him immortal it is not because I have any doubts about Conrad, but simply because I have my doubts about immortality.

PETER QUENNELL

D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley