Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

The greatest Victorian writers were the severest social critics. The “alien” visions of Tennyson, Arnold, Dickens, Carlyle and Pater; to name some of the most obvious, come immediately to mind; and these authors are Hardy’s most important predecessors as social critics. But Hardy differs from them in the intensity of his scrutiny and in his persistence in telling the Victorian profoundly disturbing truths about their values and society which they did not want to hear. David De Laura understood this when he wrote that Hardy was warning his contemporaries that “they had not imagined the human consequences of honestly living out the modernist premises. Hardy’s eye is consistently on the painful exigencies of modernism, its human cost, and not on its liberating effects. (DDL 396-399)

Examining the estrangement of the individual in the late nineteenth century, Hardy presents the costs emphatically and repeatedly. Thus the most salient distinction between Hardy’s novels and the darker works of, say, Dickens is that, in novel after novel, Hardy’s protagonists refuse to endure paralysis and emotional deprivation; and they instead make choices that prove self-destructive and ultimately alienate them from themselves and from their society.

In his autobiography, Hardy records a great many incidents which, taken together, help us better to understand the formation of his idiosyncratic imagination and to account for the pervasiveness of estrangement in his novels and poetry. For all its miscellaneous character, entries that provide a basis for seeing Hardy clear, though not whole, and despite recent discussion about the omissions and distortions of the life, it remains a valuable and indispensable source of information about Hardy’s youthful experiences and emotions. (RG 20) There is enough of what he encountered and felt to acquaint us with his art.
The roots of Hardy’s interest in estrangement may go back to the time of his birth – when he was literally cast aside as dead and survived only because of the midwife’s carefulness. Michael Millgate reports that the infant was “so lacking in motion and discernible intelligence” that his mother soon was convinced she had given birth to an idiot, and Hardy’s parents, fearing the weakly child was unlikely to live, took little interest in him, and feared to make any great emotional commitment to him.(MM 16) That incident early in *The Life*, where Hardy lies on his back, looking through his straw hat at the sun, prefigures the strain of melancholy that permeates almost all his works, (RG 15-16) and recalls particularly Jude. Deeply sensitive to the sufferings of the physically weak and to how useless he was, Hardy concluded that he did not wish to grow up or meet new people. The feeling of personal worthlessness intermittently pursued “Thomas the Unworthy”, as he called himself throughout the life (RG 200); and self- defamation may account for the weak attachment to life in most of his characters, who easily succumb to death when they cannot appease their feelings of guilt.

Hardy’s early sense of unworthiness and his desire not to grow was rejection of a self unfit for the struggle for survival. It was virtually rejection of his life. Early in life, Hardy reflected on a world that neglects us, a world full of “agony, darkness death also” (RG 112). In the poem “Tess’s Lament”, the narrator speaks for Hardy’s major fictional characters when he says:

I cannot bear my fate as writ
I’d have my life unbe;
Would turn my memory to a blot
Make every relic of me rot,
My doings be as they were not
And gone all trace of me! (JG 177)
Though some critics may be suspicious of biographical criticism, it is believed that in the treatment of a topic like estrangement, it is particularly illuminating to draw on Hardy’s personal life. One cannot come to a conclusion that Hardy’s novels and poetry are simply a reflection of his personal difficulties; they are something more than that, and this element is of major critical importance.

Hardy’s native psychological disposition was reinforced by his reading. He was familiar with the world’s great literature of pain and suffering: the Old Testament, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, and the traditional ballads. He never forgot the ballad *The outlandish Knight*, which he first heard at a harvest supper. It includes the stanza he quoted in *The Life*:

Lie there, lie there, thou false – hearted man

Lie there instead o’ me;

For six pretty maidens thou hast a-drown’d here

But the seventh hath drown-ed thee” (RG 20):

Hardy is like a prophet, crying out in the wilderness of modern life to a community threatened by the “ache” of modernism. He is an “Intellectual deliverer”, in the sense Mathew Arnold intended in his essay “The modern Element in Literature”. One who contemplates and communicates the spirit of the age. A sceptic by temperament, Hardy early learned to admire Milton, Gibbon, Shelley and John Stuart Mill. His critical bent took shape under the social protests of Saturday Review and he received with enthusiasm what many of his contemporaries felt were the “subversive” works of Darwin, Huxley and the authors of Essays and Reviews. Hardy’s genius and his reading made him welcome the awakening of the modern spirit. He would be a prophet; he wrote to Mrs. Henniker that “If you mean to make the world listen to you, you must say now what they will all be thinking and saying five and twenty years hence; and if you do that you must offend your conventional friends.”(EP 26)
At the very heart of Hardy’s greatest writing is a sense of the fragility of man’s life and the extreme suffering of human beings. Life in a godless, absurd universe is cruel; for many of its victims, Hardy repeatedly stated, it would have been better had they never been born. And while Hardy seems to understand man’s erotic impulse, what in Tess he calls the “inherent will to enjoy” there is so little for many of his characters to enjoy that their attachment to life becomes very slender. Hardy may have been affected by the Romantic poets who viewed life as purgatorial, a state of no life and no death in which the individual remains aware of “the irreparable separation between his present self which is dying and his self of the immediate past which is already dead”. Or Hardy may have been influenced by Schopenhauer whose view of tragedy necessitates the surrender of life, or at least of the will to live, as the ultimate consequence of long suffering. Increase in consciousness of man’s separation from all that is not himself, in other words, leads to a resigned acceptance of absolute separation, of death as the only mode of non-existence.

Hardy puts this argument in a very important passage in The Life:

For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable. Hence even when I enter into a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a specter not solid enough to influence my environment. (RG 209-211)
This passage throws considerable light on the major novels, since they represent Hardy’s most systematic attempt at dealing with the modern temper. Throughout Hardy’s major novels the tension is generally between the demands of nature and the demands of civilization, between the unrestrained expression of life on the one hand and the stifling norms of society on the other. The dilemma experienced by sue, Jude, Tess, Angel, Grace and Clym makes them realize that it is “a mishap to be alive”. Absolutely essential to recognition of the wish not to live is the recognition of one’s estrangement, of consciousness of self in opposition to the consciousness of the rest of existence, with increased awareness of the self increase awareness of the other as enemy.

Recent criticism has been concerned to define Hardy’s philosophical position and to show its relevance to the modern world. Ian Gregor has pointed out that while there are “a number of quite definable interests running through” the novels, “nevertheless, separate and distinctive as these interest are, they do not seem to compromise, much less to threaten the unity and coherence of the novels”. (IG 25) Gregor’s central contention is that we must not look in Hardy for the kind of enclosed Jamesian structure, but see a Hardy’s novel rather as “it unfolds in the process of reading it”. (IG 51). Both the diversity and the coherence of Hardy’s novels arise from the great depth and breadth of his sympathies. His ability to enter into a wide variety of modes of being underlies the basic structure of his novels. There are, broadly speaking, three kinds of characters in Hardy’s novels:

Characters who suffer from the “ache of modernism”. They are estranged from society because of the disparity between their ideals and the social norms – Tess, Angel, sue, Jude, Henchard, Clym and Grace, are all alienated in the Hegelian sense. On account of their own dreams and desires, they strike a discordant note, feel lonely and isolated, reel or revolt under the blows of Fate, sink in despair, and ascribe their misfortunes to the contrivance of some malicious Being. They wish never to have been born in such a defective world, and talk
now and then of committing suicide. Tess depicts the increasing oppression of society on individual by thwarting the ability of distinctive individuals to realize their best selves and by barring the expression of individual goodness by insisting on the letter of the law. Hardy’s concern with the individual emanates from his sense of society’s unaccommodating attitude to individuals. Hardy’s protagonists are not defeated only by society but by individual failings, misperceptions and weaknesses as well.

The second groups of characters are those through whom Hardy thinks. They display a compassionate outlook that gives them an ability to place the needs of another above their own self-interest, but their most characteristic quality is an ability to endure. They can accept and bear conditions about them, whether good or bad, with a kind of equanimity. They do not rail at the universe or perform impulsive acts. They are heroic in that, by virtue of their spiritual strength, they survive intact the ordeals and tribulations which would break the average man. They substitute self-abnegation for self-indulgence, renunciation for overreaching ambition, resignation that restores harmony between man and the conditions of his being, in place of the revolt of the previous group. Bathsheba’s reactions to Gabriel Oak may help to illustrate the qualities of this second group:

What a way Oak had, she thought of enduring things. Boldwood, who seemed so much deeper and higher and stronger in feeling than Gabriel, had not yet learnt, any more than she herself, the simple lesson which Oak showed a mastery of by every turn and look he gave – that among the abundance of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well, being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes. Oak contemplatively looked upon the horizon of situations without any special regard to his own perspective in their midst. That was how she would to be... (FFMC 321)
Thus this group includes Elizabeth Jane, Gabriel Oak, Diggory-Venn, Thomasin, and Clym in the later stage of his life. These characters are estranged, and they realize the disparity between themselves and the external world, but they deliberately have eliminated the gulf that had separated them from society, and, as Hegel says, by conforming to the social substance. The third group of characters are the simple rustics blissfully unaware of the painful human condition, happy with the world, never looking beyond the boundaries of Wessex. Critics have shown widespread disagreement on the subject of Hardy’s rustics, some cautiously asserting, others emphatically denying their documentary reality. (AG 123)

Hardy’s peasants are often shrewd and rarely suffer severe physical hardships. They have but slightly diverged from Nature. Their limited wants do not conflict with their silent universe.”Now ‘tis very cold, but I never feel lonely –no, not at all”, (RON 126) says Grandfer Cantle wondering at Mrs.Yeobright’s acute feeling of loneliness in *The Return of Native*. They stand for the average humanity who toil with endurance through life enjoying the bliss of ignorance. They eat and drink and talk without a touch of melancholy .Over the dead body of Fanny, Coggan says in, *Far from the Madding Crowd* ,"Drink shepherd. And be friends, for tomorrow we may be like her” at which Markclark drinks greedily and sings.

The peasants and rustics in the above discussed novels of Hardy get involve themselves in what they enjoy. The productive activities that they enjoyed in doing might have made them to lessen the obsession about the person or things that has gone from their life. To learn from such characters one should respect the boundaries of the person who is estranged; this goes for both the estrangers and the estrangees. Sometimes wilful estrangement also takes place because of lack of skills in resolving common conflicts.
The concept of estrangement is deeply embedded in all the great
religions, literature and social and political theories of the civilised epoch, and it is evident in
the writings of Hardy. All the major characters in the novels of Hardy had conflicts in their
relationships. The first step to healing might be for the person who initiated the estrangement
to work on their triggers and try to excavate what is behind their reactions. Taking the time to
heal is also a valuable step. However, where estrangement is conceived as a result of
ontological activity, any final over coming of it is impossible. As long as life and history
continues, there would always be some form of undesirable separation, a sense of
estrangement, obstacles to the satisfaction of needs and desires. Hardy’s novels reflect the
society in which he lives. The study attempted in this dissertation is mainly to discuss the
estrangements that are found in his novels. The study identifies the major problems
underwent by the human society that shaped his imagination and art. It is hoped that this
thesis will provoke further reading and bring to light several aspects of the novelist for further
discussion.