

A TRUE EAR

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A small-sized boy with a capacious back to his head, and that head ringing with dance tunes, ballads and psalm tunes, Thomas Hardy 'could tune a fiddle when he was barely breeched,' and to the end of his many days remembered a toy concertina which had been given to him when he was four years old.

An outstanding merit of Evelyn Hardy's *Thomas Hardy, a Critical Biography*, is her recognition of Hardy's sensibility to music and of the way his latent musicianship crops up in his writing, whether as a passion that helps to shape the plot, or as a fineness of ear which catches and defines the minutest sounds of nature, or as a metrical inventiveness which gave such variety to his lyrics. It was an accurate sensibility, moreover. Hardy is one of the few English writers (Shakespeare is another) who cannot be faulted in his musical technicalities; and where he makes use of this technical *savoir faire* – as for instance in the metaphor of tonalities in the Apology to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* – one feels that he has a peculiar satisfaction in doing so, as though, wedlocked to writing, he were keeping clandestine assignations with his first love.

That Thomas Hardy should have been born at that moment when Stinsford quire was dying [writes Evelyn Hardy] is an odd prank of fortune, for no one would have been a more fervent player than he. Yet we might have been the poorer: his ardour might have evaporated in evanescent music-making rather than in preserving

for us 'the old musicianers.'

Possibly the speculation might be carried further. The power of music was a power which Hardy accepted without demur, for in music there was nothing to vex his sense of justice, nothing to deplore or gainsay: one tunes the fiddle; and the tuning of a fiddle is something under a man's control, unlike the fall of events, the way of the world or the ways of a woman. The pleasure of playing in the church band might have kept Thomas Hardy at least an acquiescent churchman. He would have questioned the right dealings of the parson, no doubt, and imagined his funeral; but perhaps not God's Funeral.

But Hardy was apprenticed to architecture, wrote poetry by inclination, lost his faith, married a canon's niece, was for thirty years a novelist, and wrote on Christmas Day, 1890, 'while thinking of resuming "the viewless wings of poesy" before dawn this morning, new horizons seemed to open, and worrying pettinesses seemed to disappear.' Seventeen years later he had completed *The Dynasts*.

It is by its treatment of *The Dynasts* that any critical book on Hardy must stand or fall. Evelyn Hardy is here at her best. She begins with the initial advantage of a stroke of sound common sense, for she does not attempt to summarize the action. It is the workshop aspect she deals with: the long preoccupation, the almost instinctive gathering of material to cohere round the first material of all – the reminiscences and hearsay of Hardy's childhood; and then the strange fusion of Dorset anecdotes, old pike-heads, and uniform buttons with Aeschylus and the Immanent Will; and then, after the assemblage, the construction, the enormous fabric built up like a ship and complemented with its thronging *dramatis persona*. At the same time, she does not forget to relate *The Dynasts* to the rest of Hardy's work. Commenting that 'by comparison his stories, poems and novels, even the finest of them, seem puny and somehow lacking in masculine virility,' she suggests that 'this is because, for the first time, the writer allows himself to conceive, and to express, robust thoughts and matter which hitherto he had been forced to conceal, or

suppress, to placate an over-pudentious public. It had been his plaint more times than one that if what he wrote had been set in verse no one would carp or criticize. Now he took the full liberties which blank verse proffered.'

It was Hardy the novelist who took charge of the construction. 'He set down his thoughts in plain prose, altering it to blank verse later.' Quotations from the first draft with the subsequent emendations show, too, a setting down of plain blank verse which only a last revision fired into poetry; but the speeches of the in-prose characters, common soldiers and countrymen, are little altered, if at all, from the first draft. *The Dynasts*, in short, was a synthesis of Hardy the poet and Hardy the novelist, working together, and neither of them thwarted or deprived. This may be the reason why *The Dynasts*, for all its fatalism, its Spirits Sinister and Ironic and the outcries of its Spirit of the Pities, has never been much of a target for those who write about Hardy's pessimism; for it was where the poet was at odds with the novelist that such arrows had been aimed in the past. The Hardy of *The Dynasts* had no such chinks in his armour.

Evelyn Hardy's last chapter carries a well-argued refutation of the tedious and dishonest cliché of Hardy's pessimism, but she would have done better if she had not allowed a note of special pleading to creep in, leaving it open to the reader to conclude that it was because of a train of circumstances impacting on a character of great sensibility that Hardy's integrity might look like pessimism. Hardy's integrity looks like integrity. Apart from this, and from making perhaps rather too much of her three Ladies of the Manor, the author is to be congratulated on a careful and judicious book.