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Theme and Fancy in Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*

The Well-Beloved is a novel of wayward puerility, of a faery narrative about innocent philandering, of jaded sexual behaviour. It was written for the magazines of 1892 and was refurbished and published as a book in 1897¹ and so this tired writing brackets the composition of *Jude the Obscure*. It is possible to conclude from *The Well-Beloved* that Hardy not only had drained his imaginative resources but had used up his technical devices too. The immanent will to inspire or be indifferent about an imagined world, the energy to mirror conditions of antagonisms, the reluctant wanting to make beleaguered lives sympathetic, were perhaps all on the point of enfeeblement. If all that his imaginative power could produce at this stage was *The Well-Beloved*, it is possibly as well that the indignant critics of *Jude* so offended Hardy — so he claims — by their unwillingness or inability to recognise its worth, that he threw down his prose pen in despair of many of his contemporary readers and reviewers.

Yet is *The Well-Beloved* as bad as all that? Can there be such a discrepancy in excellence between it and *Jude*? Hardy was resentful of accusations of moral uncaring and he stresses the youthfulness of the original concept of the novel and excuses it:

“Not only was it published serially five years ago but it was sketched many years before that date, when I was comparatively a young man, and interested in the Platonic Idea, which, considering its charm and its poetry, one could well wish to be interested in always There is, of course, underlying the fantasy followed by the visionary artist the truth that all men are pursuing a shadow, the Unattainable, and I venture to hope that this may redress the tragi-comedy from the charge of frivolity”²

And writing of the *Isle of Slingers* in the preface to the novel, he considers the genealogical aspect of the theme:

Hence it is a spot apt to generate a type of personage like the character imperfectly sketched in these pages — a native of natives — whom some may choose to call a fantast (if they honour him with their consideration so far), but whom others may see only as one that gave objective continuity and a name to a delicate dream which in a vaguer form is more or less common to all men, and is by no means new to Platonic philosophers.³

Jocelyn Pierston is the "native of natives". His fantasy is projected into numerous women but notably into the three Avices, who are also natives. The "Platonic Idea" can become a timid lust rotting the idealism:

"O fatuous man, this truth infer,
Brides are not what they seem;
Thou lovest what thou dreamest her;
I am thy very dream!"

The speaker in the poem, "The Well-Beloved", is a ghost, a "Shape", a "sprite": She is the loadstone of physical desire, but finally removed from the physical; untouchable, unattainable:

"Though; since troth-plight began,
I have ever stood as a bride to groom,
I wed no mortal man!"⁴

The Life corroborates that the poem exemplifies the idea of the novel. The "fatuous man" creates his own love image which is transferable. A form of self-love, it is self-defeating. It carries the blindness and decay of romanticism, but it is a real illness and Pierston is a case.

Pierston, at twenty, returns to the Isle of Slingers having enjoyed all the opportunities, cultural and educational, that are denied Jude Fawley. The "native" has been educated away from his original environment and custom and, therefore, unlike Clym Yeobright, reacts fastidiously when impulsively kissed by Avice the First, who is indecently joyous to see him back again. The incident comprises one of those engaging asides which Hardy makes and no matter how rare the atmosphere he often, *Dynasts* - like, generates, the entelechy of gross human knowledge is a constant factor. Mrs. Caro, Senior, uninhabited by any Platonic Idea, is primly remonstrative of her daughter's behaviour:

'I was quite amazed 'ee, my child! . . . A young man from London and foreign cities, used now to the strictest company manners, and ladies who almost think it vulgar to smile broad! How could ye do it, Avice?' (p. 5)

Her naivete lies only in relation to ignorance of what Mrs. Caro considers to be superior and mannered social behaviour; Pierston's is a puzzling and alien world — in her own she is tough and informed enough. Her daughter, who like Tess has been subject to a certain amount of "education", has, because of it, forfeited some of her native independence; and she is mortified by her lapse from decorum. In the next garden, Jocelyn hears her lament:

'O, what shall I *do*! What *shall* I do!' she was saying bitterly. 'So bold as it was — so shameless! How could I think of such a thing! He will never forgive me — never, never like me again! He'll think me a forward hussy, and yet — and yet I quite forgot how much I had grown. But that he'll never believe!' The accents were those of one who had for the first time become conscious of her womanhood, as an unwonted possession which shamed and frightened her.

'Did he seem angry at it?' inquired the friend. (pp. 6-7)

Pierston's bad conscience over her shame may well have hastened the appearance in Avice of the Well-Beloved. In any event a romantic attachment is formed between them and develops strongly until Avice, because of her "modern feelings", thinks it unsophisticated to keep the tryst at Henry the Eighth's Castle to engage in the island custom on the evening before his departure. Their different interpretations of "modern" social observances break up the romance almost as much as the fickleness of the well-beloved, and we wonder about Pierston's idealism.

Immediately after receiving Avice's letter of refusal to follow the island custom, Pierston comes by chance upon the distressed Marcia Bencomb and besides the fact that they make a convenient beginning and ending to the novel, there are two entertaining aspects about the meeting and swift courtship of this pair. One is the manifestation of the "well-beloved" which is for the first time reasonably convincing in human terms; and the second, the association of the two, from their sheltering in the storm to their quarrel, is in the Hardy stream of sexual mishap. *The Well-Beloved* provokes critical speculation because it is so tantalizing, because of the enigma of its juxtaposition with *Jude* and

because of its internal artistic paradoxes. Despite the strictures of theme and plot, spurts of creative excitement and phases of valid analysis survive the contrived whimsy. Pierston's impulsive wooing of Marcia is volatile and to a degree convincing whether we concede the transubstantiation of the well-beloved or not. Marcia comes to credible life whilst Avice the First remains insubstantially elfin and is constrained by the theme. But Marcia bursts through the constraint. In a scene of ripe comedy, the conceit of the Beloved has to struggle for survival with a pile of Marcia's wet underclothing. On the same evening of their meeting the couple move into an absurd, but plausible situation at a temperance inn in Budmouth; as his "Juno" rests upstairs, Pierston conjures the image of his "ideal" from the steam rising from her sodden clothing. He dismisses the tired maid-servant:

'You are sleepy, my girl,' said Pierston.

'Yes, sir; I have been up a long time. When nobody comes I lie down on the couch in the other room.'

'Then I'll relieve you of that; go and lie down in the other room, just as if we were not here. I'll dry the clothing and put the articles in a heap, which you can take up to the young lady in the morning.'

The 'night porter' thanked him and left the room, and he soon heard her snoring from the adjoining apartment. Then Jocelyn opened proceedings, overhauling the robes and extending them one by one. As the steam went up he fell into a reverie. He again became conscious of the change which had been initiated during the walk. The Well-Beloved was moving house — had gone over to the wearer of this attire.

In the course of ten minutes he adored her. (p. 27)

It is on occasions like these — and there is an episode extraordinarily like it in *Jude* — when the homely detail of courtship resists the chimerical theme, when imaginative certainty of things reasserts itself over fancy. It arrests the book's pretentious flow. This comic element is stronger than any tragic notion of Avice being left deserted, and the focus of interest is on the absurdity of the couple's journey to London and their brief sojourn there, rather than on a desolate Avice in whom, in any case, Pierston is "not sure that he had ever seen the real Beloved . . . solicitous as he was for her welfare." Events are telescoped with comedic economy: a hasty proposal of marriage on the train journey; a typical Hardyian delay over the issue of a marriage licence; the build up of the quarrel in the hotel at Covent Garden; and finally Marcia calling it off. This, apart from his final act of senility, is the nearest Jocelyn ever

approaches to getting married, and it is noticeably not to one of the Avices. Marcia, although an islander, is not part of the mystic stream which flowed through the generations: she is astute and eventually does well for herself although the compromising position at the hotel could have ruined her. We do not see her again until age has withered her and rendered what was challenging and spirited solicitous and dull. Yet in the first section of the novel the coming together of Marcia and Jocelyn, their short courtship and estrangement, and above all the integrity of the character of Marcia, enhance and supersede the theme and lend a certain credence to a story which is otherwise in danger of falling apart. Otherwise *Part First* consists largely of a laborious reiteration of the motif of the well-beloved: the examining of it by Pierston is so tedious, his self-conscious analysis of emotion so narcissistic, his general attitude so priggish that he alienates sympathy. His concluding reflection: "As flesh she dies daily, like the Apostle's corporeal self; because when I grapple with the reality she's no longer in it, so that I cannot stick to one incarnation if I would:" only reinforces our grave doubts about the survival of him and the story.

That he does survive, in *Part Second*, is due in the main to the vivacious personality of Avice the Second and the contrasting oddity of Nichola Pine-Avon both of whom act upon him in such a way as to counter a staling fancy. Parts of this section are exuberant. Pierston, among his assets, is middle-aged but handsome and well-preserved, is professionally successful with twelve thousand pounds (his father's death adds eighty thousand pounds to his personal fortune), is eligible and vulnerable in his bachelorhood, and he moves in the best London society.

Inevitably there is a certain stiltedness in the presentation of Mrs. Pine-Avon: "she held also sound rather than current opinions of the plastic arts, and was the first intellectual woman he had seen there that night . . ." (p. 63), but she was a "gentle and thoughtful creature"; untiaered and with her chestnut hair and luminous eyes, she comes through as a country girl dispossessed of her natural heritage. However, just as she is beginning to emerge interestingly and with a certain piquancy, this first image is debilitated by Hardy's insistent theory. In one of those disconcerting London scenes she is at a dinner party with Jocelyn Pierston and their romance is freshening, when incongruously, in the middle of the fish course, he opens a letter from his native isle and learns of the death of Avice (the first) Caro. His mystic past reaches out,

and he is prey once more to sexual fantasy: "The salt airs of the ocean killed the smell of the viands, and instead of the clatter of voices came the monologue of the tide off the Beal." The situation is forced and Nichola as a character is made nonsensical as her charm weakens before the stringency of the plot:

. . . Nichola Pine-Avon lost the blooming radiance which she had latterly acquired; she became a woman of his acquaintance with no distinctive traits; she seemed to grow material, a superficies of flesh and bone merely, a person of lines and surfaces; she was a language in living cipher no more. (pp. 72-73)

The curious fact is, however, that although expedience has triumphed over characterization, Mrs. Pine-Avon survives through the development of other characteristics. A metamorphosis comes about when the distorting effect of Pierston's obsession is removed from her and her identity becomes robuster. As she comes to plead and beg his forgiveness at Sylvania Castle, she is dignified but has about her the loneliness of unreturned ardour. Dismayed with his inability to love her, Pierston, as a second-best gesture, passes her over to his tedious friend Somers. The whole episode is carried through at a frivolous level, but in the frivolity there is a certain lament: as this proud and generous woman changes hands we can hear the cackling of the Hardyan gods. She marries Somers, and they are soon sucked into the chill inevitability of Victorian family life promising, besides its traditional fecundity, a commitment to Victorian blinkers. We last see her on Budmouth Esplanade with Somers "now a middle-aged family man with spectacles — spectacles worn, too, with the single object of seeing through them — and a row of daughters tailing off to infancy . . ." (p. 170). Such is the price of normalcy, and, Hardy would hint within the novel's terms of reference, such is the price of losing the ideal. This is the coarse answer to not attaining the unattainable. Within the superfluity of the comic situation Hardy is declaring the consequence of marital propriety:

Mrs. Somers — once the intellectual, emancipated Mrs. Pine-Avon — had now retrograded to the petty and timid mental position of her mother and grandmother, giving sharp, strict regard to the current literature and art that reached the innocent presence of her long perspective of girls, with the view of hiding every skull and skeleton of life from their dear eyes. (p. 170)

Although there are bitter charm in this disillusion and an epigrammatic capture of the roll of frustrated generations, Hardy is serious about Victorian woman's dilemma:

She was another illustration of the rule that succeeding generations of women are seldom marked by cumulative progress, their advance as girls being lost in their recession as matrons; so that they move up and down the stream of intellectual development like flotsam in a tidal estuary. And this perhaps not by reason of their faults as individuals, but of their misfortune as child-rearers. (p. 170)

This pontification is, of course, only supplementary to Hardy's main theme in *The Well-Beloved*, but it proposes the pedestrian alternative to thwarted sexual search.

Although subject to the theme then, the character of Nichola, because Hardy's creative truths persist in the most artificial circumstances, in part defeats it. This is also true to a great extent of Avice the Second, who was really christened Ann, but whose name is tendentiously altered by Pierston to reinforce the idea of a recurring incarnation of the romantic ideal. The second Avice is a major invention. She indeed houses the Beloved but she emerges successfully, not only as a flirtatious urchin independent, impertinent and youthfully attractive, but also in middle age as an emotional blackmailer. Like Bathsheba Everdene, among others, she is sexually provocative but, unlike her, Avice's vacillation in choice of suitor is ironic: "I get tired of my lovers as soon as I get to know them well . . . I have loved *fifteen* a'ready! Yes, fifteen, I am almost ashamed to say" (p. 105). Independent of the theme, her boast not only deflates Pierston, preciously wrought in a balance of structures, but it also vivifies the picture of an island teenager whose only glory is the transient beauty of the youthful poor.

We first see Avice the Second through the eyes of Pierston who makes a sentimental journey to the graveside of her mother, lately dead. Avice the Second now takes in washing from the adjacent Sylvania Castle, and Pierston immediately recognizes her coarseness and toughness. She is on familiar terms with the local lads, "Charl Woollat, and Sammy Scrib-ben, and Ted Gibsey and lots o' young chaps." Any social pretension has sunk beneath the hard facts of existence: she is "clearly more matter-of-fact, unreflecting, less cultivated than her mother had been. This Avice would never recite poetry from any platform, local or other,

with enthusiastic appreciation of its fire" (p. 83). But if there has been regression in matters of refinement, there is vivacity, independence and cunning, even in her poverty. She belongs to the island magic, her appeal is sexually mystical and despite her work-hardened scruffiness the unattainable sends out bright signals and betrays its presence. During this phase of the narrative there is a certain reconciliation between theme and exploitation of character. Fantastical as the situation may be, no matter how unfeasible Avice's predominance over Pierston may seem, we can readily believe in his attraction to her. She is a Marty South made sultry, a Eustacia Vye turned laundress, a slimmer Arabella. Jocelyn Pierston forgets his London evening dresses and pearl-powder and falls deeply in love with her. This story of the sculptor-prince in his hired castle and the washer-girl at the gate may read like a fairy tale, but it is not all sentimental hoaxing.

There are, inevitably, certain pedantic intrusions: there are bound to be now that the theme becomes even more complex: to the puzzle of heritage and the elusiveness of the Beloved has been added the factor of Pierston's inability to mature. There must, we realise with dismay, be forced explanation of the magnetism of Avice:

But, after all, it was not the washerwoman that he saw now. In front of her, on the surface of her, was shining out that more real, more interpenetrating being whom he knew so well! The occupation of the subserving minion, the blemishes of the temporary creature who formed the background, were of the same account in the presentation of the indispensable one as the supporting posts and framework in a pyrotechnic display. (p. 91)

The protest is made too long and too often and mars the sad farce of Pierston's love-marking: there is too much stress on the "Protean dream creature", too often an embarrassing imagery:

He was a town man, and she an artless islander, yet he had opened himself out like a sea-anemone, without disturbing the epiderm of her nature. It was monstrous that a maiden who had assumed the personality of her of his tenderest memory should be so impervious. Perhaps it was he who was wanting. Avice might be Passion masking as Indifference, because he was so many years older in outward show. (p. 93)

Pierston is appalled to discover that he is as emotionally unstable at forty as he was at twenty, but his love is not completely unreturned: after

her admission that she, like Pierston, has been subject to many infatuations, Avice conceded that for a brief period he was one of them. But there is a vast discrepancy in the nature of their shifting passions. Avice's sexual energies are as variably directed as Pierston's, but because Avice is in contact with the roughness of day to day, because she touches commonalty, because she washes other people's sheets, because she rubs shoulders with red-jackets, quarriers and fishermen, such energies manifest themselves in physical realization whereas Pierston's burn themselves out in dreams and sighs.

Too late his longing for her at length stirs him, in a fit of social madness, to practical doing. He takes her off to London, where, after a series of adventures by night, Avice tells him about a man called, ironically, Isaac Pierston:

'I mean he courted me, and led me on to island custom and then I went to chapel one morning and married him in secret, because mother didn't care about him; and I didn't either by that time. And then he quarrelled with me; and just before you and I came to London he went away to Guernsey. Then I saw a soldier; I never knew his name, but I fell in love with him because I am so quick at that! Still, as it was wrong, I tried not to think of him, and wouldn't look at him when he passed. But it made me cry very much that I mustn't. I was then very miserable, and you asked me to come to London. I didn't care what I did with myself, and I came.' (pp. 133-34)

Although this story constitutes the revenge of the Beloved, although it shows the theme, as it were, acting in reverse, the theme is nevertheless unobtrusive at this stage. Because at the moment of Avice's confession Pierston suffers genuinely and because he feels guilty about his Platonic philandering, the scorn of this day brings about a veracity and thickening of Pierston's stature.

That his character is persuasively filled out owes as much to the contiguity of Avice's urchin sadness as to the scenes in the flat where there is a commingling of timid innocence and scandalous possibility. Avice's marital knowledge is set against her island ignorance. As Pierston fears for her safety in the perils of a London night, she happily wanders about "the fashionable streets, where ladies are all walking about just as if it were daytime!": to this fetching young tramp, furtively knowing about the larger primitive issues, it was "for all the world like coming home by night from Martinmas Fair at the Street o' Wells, only more genteel" (p.

128). Hardy excels at this sort of situational incongruity. Avice avoids the city dangers yet in her rustic wonderment at the city crowds, does not forget to buy a mouse-trap because "there are lots of mice in the kitchen — sooty mice, not clean like ours — and I thought I'd try to catch them." The frustration of Pierston is heightened by commonplace incidents, and high noble passion is mocked by the minutiae of domesticity. Pierston's sort of love cannot live with a girl in a shawl who prattles of sooty mice, but it is the nearest he ever gets to another sort of love.

Victorian propriety naturally over-rules any illicit inclination on his part. As soon as he discovers she is married, Pierston returns Avice to the vicissitudes of Portland married life, to the in-breeding, to the close gossip, to the curious adjacencies of the island where accommodation consists of "houses above houses, one man's doorstep rising behind his neighbour's chimney, the gardens hung up by an edge to the sky, the vegetables growing on apparently almost vertical planes" (pp. 3-4). The brief splendour of her youthful flirtatiousness withers on these barren hillsides: the stone dust from the quarries seems to roughen her personality and, thanks to the high-mindedness of Pierston, her life now declines into wedded tedium, a fair prosperity and the rearing of Avice the Third.

But neither her story, nor her validity as a character, ends with the second section of the novel. Twenty years later when her husband has just been killed in a quarry accident and her daughter is blossoming with the family attractiveness, Avice the Second is as quick as ever to spot a sexual opportunity. Even at the moments of her romantic unpredictability, she always retained a sense of the practical. Now as a plain widow, with pretty face and girlish laughter long vanished, she is prepared to assume the role of a maternal pimp and plans to remove her daughter from the drabness of the island. The good things lie on the mainland. Felicity is to be won through a wealthy husband. Intuitively aware of the magnetism to be found in the young beauty of her child, she sends for Pierston as soon as is decent after the death of her husband, and when Pierston comes rushing back, she flaunts her daughter unashamedly. In her middle-aged guile there is a transference of cupidity: she requires nothing material for herself: within the improbability of her scheming, her ambition is limited to seeking for her daughter a better way of life than that enjoyed by herself or by her mother. She sees nothing monstrous in the proposal of such a marriage: only wealth and security. Her attitude to Pierston is one of docile amiability and

although it is her design from first to last, she allows him to take the initiative. And he falls in love, at his advanced age, because of the reincarnation of the Beloved. She agrees to aid his wooing but "she did not say how simple she thought him not to perceive that she had already, by writing to him, been doing everything that lay in her power" (p. 164). Avice's determination to marry her daughter well is an old social game, but though it is hampered by the elfin theme, Avice's ambition makes this phase of the plot more credible:

'Avice, my dear,' she said, advancing to where the girl mused in the window-gap,⁶ 'what do you think of Mr. Pierston paying his addresses to you — coming courting, as *I* call it in my old-fashioned way. Supposing he were to, would you encourage him?'

'T' *me*, mother?' said Avice, with an inquiring laugh. 'I thought — he meant you!'

'O no, he doesn't mean me,' said her mother hastily. 'He is nothing more than my friend.'

'I don't want any addresses,' said the daughter.

'He is a man in society, and would take you to an elegant house in London suited to your education, instead of leaving you to mope here.' (p. 167)

When mercenary temptation looks like failing, she adopts meaner methods. She simulates a hysterical sickness, and, inevitably, her daughter surrenders to her tearful pleas. Yet for all her well-intentioned intrigues, there is to be found a stable integrity in Avice the Second's warmth and livingness. This matronly schemer possesses endearing cunning and exhibits a cynical hardening of the young girl who once strewed her affections about the island. She has discarded the tempestuous feeling of her own brief flowering as she tries to put an old and rational head on her daughter's romantic shoulders. Her design in the end fails, as it is right that it should. But in this last novel Hardy creates a fascinating woman character in spite of his theme: he has successfully grafted the well-meaning but self-pitying temperament of a Mrs. Yeobright on to a fetching original of a penniless, happy-go-lucky flirt. Although always intrigued by the brutal inevitability of fading beauty, Hardy had never attempted this double-tiered characterization in this way before.

One of the flying buttresses of the novel's complicated structure seems that Avice the Third is to be the most bewitching of them all: she is to be the magnetic culmination: ancestral golden qualities were to flow into her generation and make irresistible her body and being: and in an early description Hardy struggles with the concept:

The person signified, now much nearer, was a still more modernized, up-to-date edition of the two Avices of that blood with whom he had been involved more or less for the last forty years. A ladylike creature was she — almost elegant. She was altogether finer in figure than her mother or grandmother had ever been, which made her more of a woman in appearance than in years. She wore a large-disked sun-hat, with a brim like a wheel whose spokes were radiating folds of muslin lining the brim, a black margin beyond the muslin being the fellow. Beneath this brim her hair was massed low upon her brow, the colour of the thick tresses being probably, from her complexion, repeated in the irises of her large, deep eyes. Her rather nervous lips were thin and closed, so that only appeared as a delicate red line. (p. 153)

Hardy does his best to breathe life into this thematic puppet, but it is difficult to accept that the girl of this picture disturbs the heart of the sixty-year-old Pierston as his heart had never been disturbed before. Hardy's invention, at the end of a sustained creativity in fiction, is flagging, and it is not surprising that Avice the Third turns out to be colourless and passive. There is such a complexity of predesign for a poor character to contend with. If we think — to ignore, for a moment, the other "many embodiments" — of the three Avices in terms of a trinity of erotic idealization, three aspects of essentially one love, then something of a total, if forced, picture can from time to time be glimpsed. For the most part the artificial presuppositions of the story demand the acceptance of such a composite trinity. But if we think in more normal terms of character separability — hence identity and viability — of the three Avices as three women, then there is marked disproportion in the disposal of creative energy. The grandmother springs to a flickering anecdotal life and carries a gauche appeal of the injured in heart. Avice the second, as we have seen, is given the lion's share of what imaginative force Hardy has left. But by the time of Avice the Third's arrival in the narrative, Hardy's creative vigour, despite his earlier dating of the original composition, seems spent. The thematic joke has been carried too far.

It is not really surprising that Avice the Third as a character fails. So much that is conflicting has to be channelled into her. The theme demands a crystallization of the beauty of her mother and grandmother, a beauty just as appealing, just as vivacious but made rarer, with the rough Portland blemishes smoothed out; it demands an intelligence and accomplishments not normally discovered on the island; it demands refinement, a gentle disposition and above all an integrity of innocence.

Such a composition is just feasible. But the story also requires that Avice should be so stupid as to be duped by Pierston's concealment of his true age by improbable dint of appearing only in the moonlight or the shadows: that she could accept as a suitor a man who had wooed her grandmother. It is just not possible to make such a character credible: that Hardy half resolves the problem, that he establishes areas of belief about Avice the Third, is remarkable. He falls back on an argument of a curious social history: "The three Avices, the second something like the first, the third a glorification of the first, at all events externally, were the outcome of the immemorial island customs of inter-marriage and of prenuptial union, under which conditions the type of feature was almost uniform from parent to child through generations: so that, till quite latterly, to have seen one native man and woman was to have seen the whole population of that isolated rock, so nearly cut off from the mainland" (p. 161). But the anthropological argument is only partly convincing. As though conscious of this, he tries from time to time a light-hearted approach and gives Avice the ironical lines, touching in their unintention: as Pierston confesses to his pursuit of the first two Avices and that he was their "lover", she is naturally astounded:

'My mother's, and my grandmother's,' said she, looking at him no longer as at a possible husband, but as a strange fossilized relic in human form. Pierston saw it, but meaning to give up the game he did not care to spare himself.

'Your mother's and your grandmother's young man,' he repeated.

'And were you my great-grandmother's too?', she asked . . . (p. 177)

Avice the Third's character can rarely match any given situation. We struggle vainly for communication with this girl who is intended to signify so much — but the message is muffled. Rarely has Hardy introduced a human dimension into a narrative with so little chance of living.

There are indubitably episodes in this section when a flame licks promisingly at the dead wood — but just fails to ignite it: when, for instance, Avice's foot is caught in a crevice in a rock and the ancient courtier comes, like Lord Mountclere to Ethelberta's, creaking to her assistance: when the first gruesome sight of Pierston in daylight is followed by her mother's blackmailing threats of her own death (a grudging compassion is elicited for Avice in this emotional squalor):

when Pierston discovers her weeping over old French school-books (on this occasion compassion is elicited for *him* as he struggles vainly against the natural order of mating arrangements): when Avice elopes with Henri Leverre and one is stirred by memories of all those earlier runaway marriages (but there is little excitement in this one — we are not committed to its success): and finally when, after a quarrel with Henri, she returns to the island (marital disharmony is yet again showing its Hardy face). There is no doubt a certain lightness in the handling of the whole of this third section: there is little bitterness — only exhausted resignation. But the great failure of this section lies in the ultimate shaping of Avice. If she is a failure, it rationally follows that the theme must come to grief. And it collapses chiefly before the strength of common sense and human intuition, which can have no part in elfin tales. The orthodox efficiency of Marcia Bencomb, the selfish practicality of Avice the Second, the homeliness of Ruth Stockwool, all make Avice the Third's part spurious and unplayable. The result is that when she returns in the final pages she is no longer a fairy creature but a disillusioned young wife: and that is the nearest Hardy approaches to make her humanly identifiable. And with this Avice the Story shows its pronounced limp. Yet very often the narrative hobbles along with not a little ingenuity and humour. In many of Hardy's more eminent novels the narrative machinery groans from time to time but in *The Well-Beloved* the "tragi-comedy" suffers not so much from "frivolity" — we have noted some of its successes and in any case could Hardy really ever be frivolous — but much more from the noises of mechanical stress.

NOTES

1. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p. 59. There is not much critical writing on *The Well-Beloved*. Random examples: "sheer rubbish, fatuity . . ." D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 189; A.J. Guerard has some brief, yet illuminating comment but decides: "it is not the worst book ever published by a major writer. But it is certainly one of the most trivial." *Thomas Hardy. The Novels and Stories* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 68; "*The Well-Beloved* is an inward tragedy, veiled by the apparent lightness of exterior events; but it is really a sad and earnest study of a failure in the pursuit of an ideal love . . ." Frederico Olivero, *An Introduction to Hardy* (Torino, Italy: Fratelli Bocca Editori, 1930), p. 139; "one of those imaginative stories in which fantasy reigns supreme, perhaps the better to express the author's thought," Pierre d'Exidenil, *The Human Pair in the Works of Thomas Hardy* (London: Humphrey Toulmin, 1930), pp. 129-30; "*The Well-Beloved* is an absurd novel . . . but it is difficult to share the common opinion that it is trivial. It seeks to show that the beautiful appearances which

glamorize our lives are devices of cowardice; and that reality is life, and life is courage . . .," Roy Morrell, *Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), p. 119.

2. *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, p. 59.

3. *The Well-Beloved* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p.v. Subsequent page references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

3. "The Well-Beloved," *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 122.