

## Thomasin and the Reddleman

THE main action of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* occupies just a year and a day ; it culminates in the drowning of Eustacia and Wildeve. Hardy carried the story on for another two years after the disaster in Book Sixth, which he entitled "Aftercourses", and which is largely devoted to telling how Thomasin, widowed by Wildeve's death, finally married Diggory Venn, the reddleman.

But this was not the ending Hardy had originally planned for the novel ; for in the Authorized and Definitive Edition he inserted the following footnote at this point :

"The writer may state here that the original conception of the story did not design a marriage between Thomasin and Venn. He was to have retained his isolated and weird character to the last, and to have disappeared mysteriously from the heath, nobody knowing whither—Thomasin remaining a widow. But certain circumstances of serial publication led to a change of intent.

"Readers can therefore choose between the endings, and those with an austere artistic code can assume the more consistent conclusion to be the true one."<sup>1</sup>

Was Hardy right in believing the original ending to be more in keeping with the rest of the novel ? Some critics have agreed with him wholeheartedly and have branded the present ending as pandering to a debased popular taste. To this opinion the present writer must take exception : I contend that only the present ending is consistent with the rest of the novel, and that the ending originally planned, while no doubt more in keeping with Hardy's artistic individuality, shows that he failed to understand the dynamics of his own creation. The reasons that led him to give up his original intention were, it appears, practical commercial ones ; but the result in this instance was the preservation, not the abandonment, of the artistic integrity of the novel.

1. *The Return of the Native*. Authorized and Definitive Edition. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1912. p. 473.

The world's greatest novelists have always sought to interpret human life, rather than merely reporting and describing it. But interpretation calls for a set of attitudes towards life ; and in any great novel we can discern such a philosophy of life, appearing not as something external but as something growing logically out of the structure of the novel.

Hardy is one of the great ones whose philosophy is usually manifested by the material of his novels, not imposed on it from outside, but in this case his philosophy got the better of his creative intuition. That he should prefer the original ending is only to be expected ; his general outlook on life was gloomy and pessimistic, as he frequently makes clear throughout *The Return of the Native*. But in seeking to make the lives of Thomasin and Diggory conform to this philosophy, he did violence to the development of character and events in the novel.

It has been objected that the marriage constitutes a "happy ending" and that it is consequently out of place in this novel. That it is a "happy ending" is beyond question, but this ending derives just as logically from the structure of the novel as do the tragedies of Eustacia, Clym, Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright. Those who see in this an artistic flaw may be reminded that in real life joy and sorrow are inextricably mixed, and that an exclusive concentration on either one is a falsification of life, not an interpretation of it.

Hardy was consciously writing tragedy, and there can be no doubt that Eustacia, Clym, Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright are all tragic characters in the strict sense of the word ; they all had tragic flaws which contributed to the final catastrophe. It cannot, of course, be maintained that the tragedy had to take just the particular course that it did ; the plot depends far too much on apparent chance for that. But if it had not happened so, it would have happened otherwise : their doom was certain, because they carried within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. Their tragedies are the real story of the novel and are central to its purpose.

With Thomasin and Diggory the case is different. Tragedy does not require that *all* the characters come to an unhappy end ; such a state of affairs would make a mockery of tragedy. And Thomasin and Diggory are not tragic characters ; they have their faults, but they are not tragic faults ; basically they are both worthy, attractive human beings.

Thomasin is consistently depicted as a sweet and charming girl ; her calm acceptance of her lot, as a woman and as a resident of the heath, is in marked contrast to Eustacia's wild rebellion. Her nature was made for marriage, and happy marriage at that. To be sure, her road is not a smooth one : as the novel opens, she is in a pitiable predicament, and many and varied sufferings lie ahead of her. Her involvement with Wildeve was a serious error, but one which resulted primarily from girlish innocence. It was such an error as has been the ruin of many girls, in real life as in literature. But though girlish innocence may sometimes be a fatal weakness, it is not a tragic one ; Goethe's *Faust*, after all, is the tragedy of Faust and not of Gretchen.

Thomasin has the weakness of her virtues, and suffers as a result ; but ultimately she survives her ordeal unscathed, wiser, and "a widow richly left". The logic of her nature and of events makes it certain that she will marry again. She sincerely mourned her husband's loss, but her love for him was not of such a nature as to preclude another attachment once time had healed her sorrow. And even in the isolation of the heath, a woman like her could not lack for suitors. In her maturity she would not repeat the mistake she made with Wildeve ; in particular, her sad experience with the latter's charming exterior would help her better to appreciate Diggory's solid qualities. There can be no doubt about it : remarriage was Thomasin's destiny.

Thomasin is essentially a simple character ; Diggory is certainly complex. It must be admitted, too, that there is an element of mystery about him ; yet the plain fact is that he is not nearly so mysterious as Hardy intended, or, evidently, supposed. It is enlightening to compare Hardy's concept of the character, as revealed in the footnote quoted above, with Diggory as we actually see him in the novel. Hardy apparently intended to make him a *deus ex machina*, but in this he was only partially successful. Diggory's function in the plot, and even, to a great extent, his manner of functioning, are indeed those of a *deus ex machina* ; but Hardy, far from making him a shadowy background figure, has made him a full-blooded human being, in some ways the most attractive character in the book, and one for whom the reader's sympathies are definitely enlisted.

The novelist was here faced with a dilemma which was, essentially, impossible of resolution : on the one hand he wanted to make Diggory a man of mystery, on the other he was under the necessity of motivating his actions.

Professor J. O. Bailey, taking up an expression used by Hardy himself in *The Return of the Native*, some years ago wrote an article entitled "Hardy's 'Mephistophelian Visitants'",<sup>2</sup> in which he cites Diggory as a prime example of those visitants who recur in most of the novels. The article throws a revealing light on a bizarre element of Hardy's craft;<sup>3</sup> but he does not discuss the problem which concerns us here: can mystery and motivation be reconciled? Mephistopheles, as we see him in folk-tales, Marlowe, or Goethe, is what he is precisely because he is not human (though he may display certain human traits), and the authors were thus under no obligation to provide human motivation for his actions; equally, the original *dii ex machina* were introduced precisely as non-human agencies.

But Hardy, however mysterious he may have wanted to make Diggory, never intended that he should be, in the last analysis, anything more or less than a human being (the words he used in the footnote are "isolated and weird"). Had Diggory been a minor character, Hardy might have succeeded in his design to make him mysterious merely by saying little about him. However, Diggory is one of the principal characters, and his involvement in the plot is essential: without him things never would have taken the particular turn they did. Hardy thus felt obliged, and in this he was certainly right, to provide human motivation for Diggory's actions.

The key to Diggory's actions is, of course, his devotion to Thomasin. But this was not generally known to the other characters (at the start of the novel only Thomasin herself knew of it; some of the others were gradually made aware of it in the course of the novel), and so to them Diggory could appear mysterious. The reader, however, is in a different situation. Diggory's interest in Thomasin had already been hinted at in Chapter II of Book First, at his first appearance on the scene; it is made entirely clear in Chapter IX of the same book—only his third appearance.

Of course, not everyone in Diggory's position would have acted in just the way he did; his own nature is responsible for the manner, but not the fact, of his involvement. But given his love for Thomasin and his

2. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXI (1946), pp. 1146—1184.

3. However, certain criticisms of detail suggest themselves; thus, Bailey quotes Goethe's "Ein Theil von jener Kraft, Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft" and applies it to Diggory. But if this is the criterion, then Diggory could be said to be the very opposite of a Mephistopheles: he seeks the good and works evil. This appears most clearly in the episode of the money entrusted to Christian by Mrs. Yeobright: Diggory's motive is only to help Thomasin and protect her interests, yet through his ignorance of the actual facts (which he had no way of knowing), he thereby contributes to the final tragedy. Of the major characters in the novel, it is only Wildeve who regards Diggory as a worker of evil, and that because Diggory is seeking to counter Wildeve's own evil designs.

basic nature—and that is really not so unusual as some critics would have it—his actions are completely understandable in human terms alone; indeed, only so are they understandable. To the inhabitants of Egdon he may have been mysterious; to the reader he is not, whatever Hardy may have thought or intended.

The reader's opinion of Diggory may thus differ from Hardy's; and this difference may entail the rejection of the "austere" ending which Hardy preferred.

Despite Diggory's devotion to Thomasin, it might still conceivably be consistent with his character for him simply to disappear from the heath, as Hardy intended. Professor Albert Guerard says, "The original ending of *The Return of the Native* would have been more satisfactory even for Diggory, who was certainly the kind of man to prefer Thomasin's lost glove to Thomasin herself."<sup>4</sup> The point is debatable; however, whether one agrees with it or not, it is actually irrelevant, for Diggory, as he has been revealed to us by his actions in the course of the novel, was bound to sue for Thomasin's hand once again. Diggory's love was selfless, but only so long as he was convinced that Thomasin's happiness or best interest lay in another quarter.

Thomasin's letter which is quoted in full in Book First, Chapter IX, shows that some two years earlier Diggory had asked for her hand in marriage. To urge that another young man in his place would have persisted in his suit and would not have abandoned his proper station in life for that of a reddleman is of course irrelevant; it cannot be argued from that that Diggory's intentions were other than sincere and earnest, or that he did not have a reasonable hope of success.

Towards the end of Book First it appears that Wildeve is not going to marry Thomasin, but is going to leave her in an equivocal situation. When Diggory learns of this he thinks that Thomasin's changed circumstances may offer him a better chance with her than before, and he again comes forward with his proposal of marriage. In Chapter XI he tells Mrs. Yeobright, "I should be glad to marry your niece, and would have done it any time these last two years." There is nothing in the novel to suggest that this is not the simple truth.

4. *Thomas Hardy. The Novels and Stories*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1949. p. 119.

Some time later, in Chapter VII of Book Second, Eustacia asks Diggory if he is going to marry Thomasin. He takes her question for mockery, since at that stage he had no reason to believe in the possibility of the marriage. On the evening of the same day, Wildeve refers to the same thing; now Diggory begins to think that perhaps the rumor has an element of truth, and he acts decisively: he returns to his van, puts on his best clothes, and goes at once to the Yeobright cottage. But Wildeve has been there before him, and he and Thomasin are in fact married two days later.

Throughout the novel Diggory thus demonstrated not only his constant devotion to Thomasin but also his readiness to marry her if this should ever be possible. Consequently it is hard to believe that after the tragedy which left her a widow, and thus removed all external obstacles to their union, he would not again press his suit, rather than simply disappearing from the heath.

Diggory had his psychological quirks, of course; it is not hard to see in him certain suggestions of masochism. Some critics would exaggerate these and make of him the sort of person who subconsciously courts failure and rejection; they would doubtless say that he sued for Thomasin's hand only so long as he was likely to be rejected, and that when his chances of being accepted improved, he would withdraw from the field. Apparently Hardy too saw Diggory in some such light.

But this view carries Diggory's strangeness farther than Hardy in the body of the novel gives us any warrant for. The scene outside the Yeobright cottage previously referred to is revealing. After learning that Wildeve was after all going to marry Thomasin, "Venn's heart sank within him, though it had not risen unduly high."<sup>5</sup> "Venn sadly retraced his steps into the heath. When he had again regained his van he lit the lantern, and with an apathetic face began to pull off his best clothes."<sup>6</sup> The kind of person who seeks failure does so in order to wallow in his suffering; but there is no suggestion of that here. Diggory's feelings and actions seem entirely normal: we have a young man who has long since resigned himself to the loss of his beloved; suddenly he learns that there may be a chance for him after all, and his spirits rise, though not too far (since the chance appears dubious); with the prompt dashing of this new hope, apathy sets in—surely all this follows quite a normal pattern. By way of contrast, Clym may indeed be said to wallow in his suffering.

5. Book Second, Chapter VII.

6. *Loc. cit.*

Diggory's psychological quirks, then, were not great enough to deflect him at any point from his steadfast purpose to marry Thomasin if it should ever be possible, whatever Hardy may have thought. Agreeing with Professor Guerard that "The meaning and interest of a novel lies in what the novel says, not in what it was intended to say,"<sup>7</sup> I believe that the marriage of Thomasin and Diggory is the only outcome consistent with their natures and the parts they play in the novel. The ending Hardy preferred would be an arbitrary interference with the organic structure of the novel, a gratuitous intrusion of his own philosophy, and thus a prime example of tendentiousness in literature. *The Return of the Native* is a great novel in part because the chief characters live out the destinies inherent in their natures; its stature would be diminished if Hardy had persisted in imposing his own, alien will on Thomasin and Diggory.

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7. *Op. cit.*, p. xi.