4 The Country Novel before Hardy

The chief limitation of the country novel in the mid-nineteenth century is summed up admirably in an anonymous notice of Silas Marner in 1861:

The words of George Eliot come on us as a new revelation of what life in quiet country parishes really is and has been. How hard it is to draw the poor may easily be seen if we turn to the ordinary tales of country life that are written in such abundance by ladies. There the poor are always looked at from the point of view of the rich. They are so many subjects for experimenting on, for reclaiming, improving, being anxious about, and relieving. They have no existence apart from the presence of a curate and a district visitor. They live in order to take tracts and broth.

This way of looking at the poor had virtually dehumanised them. They remained ‘a distinct race. What they think of and do when they are not being improved and helped, remains a blank.’ George Eliot was, therefore, doing something completely new when she wrote about this ‘unknown, and to most people unknowable section of society’; as people with an independent existence and value of their own.

Whether George Eliot was in fact as original as the reviewer claimed is a complex question. But his analysis of the country novel before her time was, broadly speaking, correct. The poor were usually noticed as objects of charity or not at all. It was possible for works to appear with titles like Town and Country (a novel by Frances Trollope which draws a simple moral contrast between a country vicarage and Regency London), or The Village Comedy, which did not say a word about the majority of human beings who made up the rural population. The focus of interest – as we can see from a title like A Country Gentleman and his Family – was the squirearchy who inhabited the local
The adventures and love affairs of these people formed a staple part of respectable Victorian fiction. In these novels the countryside was seen as a picturesque background and the people who worked in it as natural inferiors who could be patronised if they were 'deserving'. Typical examples are Cuthbert Bede's *Our New Rector* — where the hero shows his moral worth by calling on his poor parishioners before the rich ones — John Mills' *The Old English Gentleman* and Holme Lee's *A Poor Squire*. The poor — as servants or dependents of the great house — are shown as having the greatest affection and reverence for their superiors. R. D. Blackmore, the author of *Lorna Doone*, wrote several novels about the countryside which share the same attitudes. In his *Cripps the Carrier* the bigoted old Tory, Squire Oglander, is a benevolent and 'lovable' character, and people only laugh when he threatens jokingly to send them to the workhouse. Paternalist attitudes were sometimes pushed to an extreme, as in Thomas Dolby’s *Floreston*. The hero of this novel is an enlightened landlord who rescues the villagers from the workhouse and gives them decent wages. But they have to give him a security for their good behaviour:

such security to be considered as extending to wilful neglect of Divine Worship, to drunkenness, or other immoralities, to dirtiness (except while actually employed in duties that should make it unavoidable), raggedness and the utterance of any blasphemous or obscene expression.

These are the degenerate examples of a genre that had been lifted to greatness by Jane Austen at the beginning of the century. Her works are the classic examples of the country-house novel. In *Emma* the only characters who really matter are the small group of families who form the polite society of Highbury. The poor, never seen directly, are represented by some wretched cottagers to whom Emma is charitable; also by poultry-stealers and some rather aggressive gypsies. Later in the century new social questions began to enter fiction — questions which Jane Austen had not found it necessary to ask. The relationship between classes became the central issue of the time. In certain novels of the 1840s and onwards, the violence which was so marginal in *Emma* becomes pervasive and takes the form of rioting, machine-smashing and rick-burning. The image of a mob