3 A Regional Approach to Hardy’s Fiction

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To suggest that little has been written about Hardy’s regionalism may, at a first hearing, sound absurd, but if the term is used at all precisely such a statement is true. Most of the numerous studies of Hardy’s Wessex have been primarily topographical (that is, dependent upon comparison with a known landscape) or else concerned in merely general terms with the rural background. However, the qualities that identify ‘the regional novel’ are much more specific, and it is worth while considering his work in this context since, for students of regionalism in fiction, Hardy is a supremely important witness.

In The English Regional Novel, Phyllis Bentley listed the following characteristics of the genre: ‘Its first great merit is, of course, its brilliant illuminations of English landscape.... Its transcendent merit is that of verisimilitude.... Lastly, the regional novel is essentially democratic. It expresses a belief that the ordinary man and the ordinary woman are interesting and worth depicting.’1 Particularity, realism, and a faithful, sympathetic presentation of life and labour: these may be accepted as essentials. But other factors are also involved. Since the characteristics of a distinctive community gradually develop over an extended period of time, the regional novelist will usually be concerned with historical—or even archaeological—customs and survivals. And above all, because of the importance of accuracy and detail, he is not likely to be successful unless he can claim what F. W. Morgan has called ‘absorption in a particular locality: absorption and not merely interest’.2

The tendency to neglect Hardy’s associations with regionalism probably stems from a widespread suspicion that to call a novelist ‘regional’ is somehow limiting. It could be argued, however, that

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Hardy demonstrated his genius as a literary artist by the way in which he raised regional fiction to a much higher level than it had hitherto attained. He was able, in fact, to introduce two new elements into the genre which not only counteracted its limitations but even turned them into strengths.

With the exception of Trollope (who had different intentions), Hardy was the first English novelist to postulate a series of novels all focusing upon a particular locality. This has considerable implications for regionalism, since it enables the writer to evolve his regional awareness cumulatively. Thus an individual novel—Under the Greenwood Tree, for instance—may be too confined in its setting to qualify as regional in itself, yet it may ultimately take a legitimate place within a regional series. (The example is particularly apt in so far as Under the Greenwood Tree was written before Hardy thought of a series of local novels, and was only integrated into the Wessex scheme, after some revision, at a later date.) Moreover, Hardy’s conception of Wessex can assist us in establishing more precisely what constitutes a region. It is significant that Morgan, who approaches regionalism from a sociological perspective, invokes Hardy as soon as he comes to consider the literary aspects of his subject:

The heart of [Hardy’s] Wessex, like the territories of most other regional authors, does not coincide with the boundaries of any region a geographer may draw, but there is no doubt that the Dorset of the novels is an individuality. The scenery varies from the clay lowland of the Vale of Blackmore to the chalk uplands of the centre and coastal regions and the heath country of the south-east. But there was unity in diversity, for the different geographical tracts were complementary to each other with their different products from meadow, arable, chalk pasture, woodland, or heath.3

Clearly, a regional analysis of this scope could only be attempted on the broad canvas that a novel-series provides.

The second of Hardy’s contributions to the subject concerns the relation of his ‘circumscribed scene’ to the larger world. The chief case against regionalism lies in its undue emphasis upon the uniquely local which, almost by definition, leads to distortion. If a regional presentation confines itself to those aspects which distinguish it from other regions, no representative statement is possible. He who knows only his region, we might say, knows little of that. Raymond