CHAPTER II

THOMAS HARDY AND THE SEXUAL THEME

It is not long ago that Hardy gave up the novel because he felt that he could not deal honestly with themes that were of importance to him. It is easy to forget, in our plethora of sexual sewage, that simply in terms of subject-matter the naturalists made possible a necessary maturity in social attitudes toward sex, and sex apart, they introduced the notion that any and all experience is material for the novel.¹

1. Thomas Hardy and the Schopenhauerian Will

Though he considered himself a realist, Hardy consistently maintained that in the writing of fiction a slice of life was not enough. The quality of the cut was important, too. If a story is to be told, it must be sufficiently exceptional to warrant its telling. The whole secret of fiction, he observed, and of drama as well, lay, in structural terms, “in the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal.”² Hardy perceived the contradiction, often tragic in its impact, that cuts through all of life, between the lofty ideals a man wishes to pursue and the unfortunate conditions in which he finds himself trapped. This was the central idea set forth in Jude the Obscure. In keeping with his Schopenhauerian pessimism, Hardy believed that non-rationality was the ruling principle of the universe. Nor could he conceive of a morality associated with Nature. Men are victims, puppets of fate, not autonomous heroes. There is no principle of poetic justice at work. Like Schopenhauer who not only influenced his Weltanschauung but profoundly affected his philosophy of love, he stressed the opposition between the aims of the individual and those of the species. The individual is the objectification of the life of the species and his supreme concern, whether or not he is

² Florence Emily Hardy, The Later Years of Thomas Hardy. New York: Macmillan Co., 1930, p. 16.
aware of it, is to insure the propagation of the race. That is why he is equipped with the sexual instinct. The individual is but a servant of the biological Will.

Hardy was deeply impressed by Schopenhauer’s analysis of the paradoxical role that sex plays in the modern world, where “it is really the invisible central point of all action and conduct, and peeps out everywhere in spite of all veils thrown over it.” 3 The conflicts generated by the sexual impulse are, as Schopenhauer pointed out, amply productive of irony, just as the vagaries of love have traditionally been the food of comedy.

It is the cause of war and the end of peace, the basis of what is serious and the aim of the jest, the inexhaustible source of wit, the key to all allusions, the meaning of all mysterious hints, of all unspoken offers and all stolen glances, the daily meditation of the young, and often also of the old, the hourly thought of the unchaste, and even against their will the constantly recurring imagination of the chaste, the ever ready material of a joke, just because the profoundest seriousness lies at its foundation. It is, however, the piquant element and the joke of life that the secret concern of all men is secretly pursued and ostensibly ignored as much as possible. But, in fact, we see it every moment seat itself, as the true and hereditary lord of the world, out of the fulness of its own strength, upon the ancestral throne....'

No greater tribute has ever been paid by a philosopher to the universal power of the sex instinct. It brilliantly anticipates some aspects of Freud’s teaching. Hardy, in reading this passage, must have been struck by Schopenhauer’s definition of the joke of life: that the overriding concern of all men is secretly pursued and ostensibly ignored as much as possible. Hardy was in fundamental agreement with Schopenhauer’s belief that the idealization of sexuality definitely points to the fact “that the sexual passion is the kernel of the will to live....” 5

In short, the experience of love, however glorified by the rhetoric of romance, is rooted in the sexual instinct, for what is the object of love, from the lowest to the highest forms of being, if not the perpetuation of the species. That is how the will to live tyrannizes over the individual. When he projects his desire onto a woman who for him seems to incarnate the perfect image of all beauty and pleasure, that is the illusion cunningly wrought in him by the reproductive instinct, though he continues blindly to believe that in choosing this sexual object he is

4 Ibid., III, 313-314.
5 Ibid., III, 314.