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THE NOVELS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

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THE early reviewers' notion that Jefferies's true *metier* was the word painting of natural beauty and little else, was given authoritative approval by Saintsbury,[1] and is endorsed by Mr Ascoli in his Introduction to *The World's Classics* edition (1948) of *The Gamekeeper at Home,* and *The Amateur Poacher.*

> It is not as a visionary or a novelist or a social thinker that Jefferies is likely to endure: for in each of these guises he fell a victim to his own spiritual confusion ... It was not the world of ideas that was his parish, but the world of nature—the simple lovely things of the earth. Here he is supreme...

However, I believe this to be a mistaken view, and hope to show, by short analyses, that his considerably varied themes and characteristic attitudes find their richest and most vital expression in his three best, but unjustly very neglected,[2] novels — *Greene Ferne Farm, The Dewy Morn,* and *Amaryllis at the Fair.* These, I think, will be found to repay the attention of the student of literature, and deserve to be much more widely known and enjoyed.

The earliest and the slightest of this group is *Greene Ferne Farm* (1880). It is of course true that here the ostensible main story is conventional; being of a type which would be expected by the late Victorian circulating library reader. The account of the rival wooing of Margaret Estcourt by Geoffrey and Valentine, it must be admitted, comes only partly alive. Yet Margaret herself has considerable life; she is a graceful but healthy and strong country girl; 'she was simply very near the ideal of a fair young English girl, in the full glow of youth, and with all its exquisite bloom' (Ch. I), and, as we shall see, she partly foreshadows the much greater figure of Felise in *The Dewy Morn.* Also the chapter (X, A Fray) where Geoffrey and Valentine move through the hedges firing at each other (the fight having been started by a stray shot when on a shooting expedition), is powerfully presented and psychologically true. In the heat of the moment civilized restraint breaks down, and the rivals express their smouldering jealousy in a more primitive manner.

However, the strength of the book lies elsewhere. Firstly, not all the characters are conventional; the rustics, the farmers Ruck and Hedges, discussing the 'fine growing marning' before church, as Hedges leans over the churchyard wall, and with his stick rubs the back of the fattest pig in the sty underneath (Ch. I), or fighting when drunk at the concluding marriage feast (Ch. XI); old Pistol Legs (with his *summum bonum, '*The vinest theng of all be a horn o' ale, and a lardy cake'); Jabez, the shepherd and stentorian-voiced chorister—all these have a vigorous life founded on Jefferies's experience and observation. They are not romanticized; thus Jabez, although in many ways a comic figure, is greatly concerned about, and ready to receive a nephew who had lain injured for months in the neighbouring town, 'yet with the curious apathy of the poor, he had made no enquiries about him previously'. The colloquy between Valentine and the old

woman weighed down by a bundle of gleanings (Ch. VIII) — as in the evening, he walks some way along the road with her, carrying her basket — shows with satiric point the bitterness frequently found in the heart of aged country folk who have endured a life of grinding poverty. It is worth quoting at some length, as it gives a good early instance of Jefferies's lively and humorous use of the Wiltshire dialect.

> Well, it's beautiful weather for the harvest.'
> 'Aw eez — the het makes um giddy; our ould Bill fell down; the garden be a-spoilng for rain.'
> 'The farmers pay good wages now, don't they?'
> 'Um pays what um be obliged to.'
> 'You have a good landlord here— Squire Thorpe.'
> *'He!* Drotted ould skinflint! You go and look at thaay cottages: thaay be his'n. The rain comes drough the thatch, and he won't mend it. I be forced to put a umberella auver my bed nights when it rains.'
> '. . . The Vicar— Mr Basil— is kind to the poor, is he not?'
> 'Our paason! ould varmint—a' gives all the coals and blankets at Christmas to thaay as goes to church, and narn to thaay as be chapel-volk. What have he done with the widders' money, I wants to knaw?'
> 'What money was that?'
> 'Why, that as was left to us widders of this yer parish for ever: you med see it stuck up in the chancel. I never seed none of it, nor anybody else as ever I heard tell on.'

Finally Valentine, returning her basket, gives her money, but she 'put the shilling in her pocket, readjusted her burden, and tottered on, muttering to herself, 'The gurt chattering fool to come a' hindering I!'

The minor figure of Augustus Basset, an old soldier, 'the last stray relic of a good family, half bailiff, half hanger-on, half poacher and never wholly anything except intoxicated', is perfectly convincing. Having been content to watch with interest the fight between Geoffrey and Valentine, as long as they are evenly matched, he nevertheless immediately intervenes to avert disaster as Geoffrey comes forward into the open, his ammunition spent. Exclaiming 'Fair play in the army,' he strikes the barrel of Valentine's gun, thus diverting what would have been a fatal shot. It is Augustus who staunches the flow of blood welling from Geoffrey's wound; he is the one who is able to act calmly:

> Long hardened, and indifferent to all but the immediate gratification of his senses with smoke and beer, Augustus had lost all the finer perceptions, and had become not exactly callous, but unimpressionable. That very condition rendered his aid valuable at such a time.

At first at the inn, he tells the truth about the fight, but, of course, is not believed.

> They grinned at the idea of Geoffrey and Valentine firing intentionally at each other, and still more ridiculed the embellishment which he added — how he stepped between the levelled guns at the risk of his life. They knew him too well.
> 'It wur an accident of course,' they said.
> 'I tell you they fought a regular battle,' said Augustus, in a towering rage. 'You be a parcel of fools!'
> 'If they did vite,' said the landlord slowly, 'you med be zure Basset put his yod (head) inside a rabbit hole vor fear of the shot — and how could he knaw?'

But when he 'sees on which side his bread is buttered' he is quite content to hush up the real course of the fray. Given shooting rights by the Squire for his timely intervention, he does not, however, make use of them, for 'the incitement of poaching was lacking'.

However, by far the most powerful figure, heralding in this early novel Jefferies's real distinction as a novelist, is that of old Andrew Fisher. His past has been stormy and cruel: he belongs to an earlier and more savage era of rural society (cf. Chapter VI, A Farmer of the Olden Times, in *Roundabout a Great Estate);* but we see him (Ch. III) as he sits, in early summer, in his beehive chair in the great mullioned window of Warren House, drowsily listening to the distant clack of the hopper in the mill; oblivious to the beauty of nature around him.

> Hard as his own nether millstone was the heart of old Andrew Fisher. The green buds of spring, the flowers of summer, the fruits of autumn, the dead leaves of winter — all the beauty and the glory of nigh on a century touched him not. Unchanged at heart still, like the everlasting hills around him. But even they bear flowers — ling, loved by bees, and thyme.

Such insensitiveness is always an evil for Jefferies; Robert Godwin in *The Dewy Morn* is, as will be seen, similarly unfeeling, and that is a large part of his condemnation. Old Fisher's death is grimly ironic: here is an early instance of Jefferies's quite masterly power of irony. In a parallel scene (Ch. IX), but in autumn now ('As a ripe pear that waited but the rude shock of the wind, the full year was bending to its fall'), he sits dead in his chair, the sun lighting up his furrowed face, as the labouring women go by:

> The fresh breezes filled their nostrils in the spring with the delicate odour of the flowering beanfield and the clover scent; the very ground was gilded with sunshine beneath their feet. But the magic of it touched them not, for their hearts were pinched with poverty.

They too are oblivious of the life of nature, but from a man-made cause. His old harridan of a housekeeper, the snufftaking Jane, together with her crony, the old nurse, plunder his home ruthlessly and abscond; the old tyrant is no sooner dead than he is set at nought and wantonly triumphed over — they even remove the seal ring from his finger. The scene ends in macabre comedy; in his bedroom they come across a portrait of his long since dead wife:

> 'Ay, poor theng,' said Jane, 'thuck ould varmint ground the life out of her. A'wuver the picter be zet in gould; we med as well have un.'
>
> 'A' wish us could take zum on these yer veather beds,' said the other. 'Couldn't you and I car um zumhow?'
>
> 'Us could shove one in a box,' said Jane, 'and tell the miller to zend un in his cart. He wouldn't knaw, doan't ee zee?'
>
> They actually carried this idea into execution, and sent the miller's cart off with the feather bed.

The old man is discovered by the clergyman Felix St Bees, whose previous reception when calling to ask for the hand of May, his granddaughter, had been, in striking contrast, most violent. After a whole scene (Ch. III) which is

intensely dramatic, the old man, having listened with ominous silence interspersed with the briefest remarks, to Felix's rather jejune preliminaries, at the final request had thrown his blackthorn at his head, smashing the waterjug on the table;

> 'Jim! Bill! Jane! Jack!' shouted the old man, starting out of his chair, purple in the face. 'Drow this veller out! Douse un in th'hog vault! Thee nimity-pimity odd-me-dodd! Iwarn thee'd like my money! Drot thee and thee wench!'

Again, themes later fully developed are in this novel only lightly touched upon. Thus, in the way of the illuminating presentation of social themes (in which, *pace* Mr Ascoli, it seems to me that Jefferies showed great insight),[3] there is the episode of the strike on Mrs Estcourt's farm (Ch. IV), which occurred there, because as a woman, it is expected she will have to surrender and raise the wages, making the neighbouring farmers follow suit. The men, however, are 'shamed' into returning, by the spectacle of the ladies, aided by Geoffrey, Valentine, and St Bees, making hay. In this delightful and humorous chapter there is sympathetic observation of the old skill exercised in rural crafts, slowly passing away; as the care taken in making scythes:

> 'Aw,' said the mower, tilting his hat back, 'th' blades be as good as ever um wur — thaay folk at Mells be th' vellers to make scythes. Thur bean't as good as thairn. But it be th' handle, look 'ee, as I means. I minds when thaay wur made of dree sails of wood, a main bit more crooked than this yer stick, and sart o' carved a bit, doan't 'ee sec? It look a chap a week zumtimes to find a bit a' wood as ud do. But, bless ee, a'moast anything does now.'

The visit of Geoffrey and St Bees to the injured labourer lying at Kingsbury (Swindon) in a frightful little jerry-built house where the bedroom window is not even constructed to open, touches on the evils of industrial housing, the ugliness and deadness:

> At the end of a new street hastily 'run upcheap' and 'scamped', they found a large black pool, once a pond in a meadow, now a slough of all imaginable filth, at whose precipitous edge the roadway stopped abruptly, without rail or fence, or wall. Little children playing hare and hounds, heedless of their steps, fell in, and came out gasping, almost choked with foul mud. Drunken men staggered in occasionally and came out stiff, ghastly, with slime in the greedy mouths that had gorged at the Melting Pot. Yet this horrible slough was on the very verge of beauty; it was the edge and outpost of the town. Across this dark pit were green meadows, hawthorn hedges and trees. The sweet breeze played against the dead red brick; odours of clover were blown against the windows; rooks came over now and then with their noisy caw-cawing. Shamefully 'scamped' was the row of six-roomed houses — doors that warped and would not shut, and so on.

The date of this novel is 1880, but here in embryo is the substance of D. H. Lawrence's indictment of the appallingly ugly homes of the period of industrial expansion, found (say) in *Nottingham and the Mining Countryside,*

Of course, as one would expect, there is found in the novel a rich sensuousness of natural description, but this is only one strand in the pattern. However, these scenes are among the freshest and most delightful that Jefferies ever did. One might instance the particularity of the

description of Thorpe Woods in autumn (Ch. VIII, Nutting) as the company searches for hazel nuts.

> Then past narrow 'drives' or tracks, going through the woods, bounded on each side with endless walls of ashpoles with branches of pale green; carpeted with dark green grass and darker moss luxuriating in the dank shade, and roofed with spreading oak-spray. These vistas seemed to lead into unknown depths of forest. They paused and looked down one, feeling an indefinite desire of exploration, and as they looked, in the silence a leaf fell, brown and tanned, with a trembling rustle, and they saw its brown oval dot the rank green grass, upon whose blades it was upborne.[4]

There is delicate and precise observation throughout; as

The nuts grow under the bough in such a position, that, in pulling it down to reach a visible bunch, the very motion of the bough as it bends hides the rest beneath it. The central portion of the book, the night which Geoffrey and Margaret are forced to spend together on the Downs (Chs. V, VI and VII), is vividly rendered; being indeed quite a remarkable piece of sustained sensuous evocation — the gradual descent of the mist, the confusion in the dark, the chance finding of the entrance to the barrow in which Margaret is able to rest, and the glory of the sunrise:

> Out of the last fringe of mist shone a great white globe, like molten silver, glowing with a lusciousness of light, soft yet brilliant, so large and bright, and seemingly so near— but just above the ridge yonder — shining with heavenly splendour in the very dayspring. . . Under him the broad bosom of the earth seemed to breathe instinct with life, bearing him up, and from the azure ether came the wind, filling his chest with the vigour of the young day.

The comparison of this early work with Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* will suggest itself to most readers. Both are short, both follow the revolutions of the seasons as the story progresses, both touch on passing rustic customs, and both end with a country marriage feast. However, although Hardy's is somewhat the more technically polished work, it is less rich in themes, and Jefferies's rustics, although often amusing, are never felt to be merely comic, nor is there any trace of a patronizing attitude in the author, such as we often detect in the presentation of the Tranter, Old William and the rest. The nearest Jefferies comes to this is in the overheard wooing of Tummas and Rause, but it has the liveliness and grace of the old folk-idiom:

> 'Thee's got a voice like a wood-pigeon,' said a woman Geoffrey heard get over the gate at the corner of the wood. 'Thee mumbles, Tummas, like a dumble-dore in a pitcher.'

Also there is more constructional technique than may at first be noticed. This extends not only to broad effects like the already noticed parallel scenes of Old Fisher in his chair, alive on an early summer afternoon, but dead on an autumn evening; but also to small incidents. For example, at the close, the sun lights up the venerable countenance of Old Pistol Legs, when he is delivering his touching encomium on the marriage feast,[5] and Jefferies adds:

This poor old man, humble as he was, had many friends, both of his own class and among those above him, to give him a kind word or a lift. A contrast this, with the ancient and brutal miser Fisher, who had faced that other magnificent sunset on the hills the year before.

2

The Dewy Morn (1884) represents a tremendous advance; it is one of the finest late nineteenth-century novels, and has for us a distinctly contemporary appeal. The opening (the heroine Felise's walk over Ashpen Hill in the early morning) has marvellous sensuous richness and delicacy. The theme of *The Story of My Heart* is here lived through, but it is only one *motif* in the complex whole.

Felise was lying on the flowers and grass, extended under the sun, steeped in their sweetness. She visibly sat on the oak trunk —invisibly her nature was reclining, as the swimmer on the sun-warmed sea. Her frame drooped as the soul, which bears it up, flowed outwards, feeling to grass and flower and leaf, as the swimmer spreads the arms abroad, and the fingers feel the water. She sighed with deep content, dissolving in the luxurious bath of beauty.

Her strong heart beating, the pulses throbbing, her bosom risings, and regularly sinking with the rich waves of life; her supple limbs and roundness filled with the plenty of ripe youth; her white, soft, roseate skin, the surface where the sun touched her hand glistening with the dew of the pore: the bloom upon her — that glow of the morn of life — the hair more lovely then than the sunlight, the grace unwritten of perfect form — these produced within her a sense of existence — a consciousness of being, to which she was abandoned; and her lips parted to sigh. The sigh was the expression of feeling herself to be.

Throughout these pages the writing is extremely distinguished; there is an extraordinary sense of life, the impersonal 'love' of Felise giving her a vital relationship with the cosmos. As one reads them, one compares them with the beginning of Lawrence's *Rainbow;* in Lawrence there is a similar sensuous richness, but the predominant feeling is the organic 'blood' bond between man and his environment, while in Jefferies the rapture is of a more mystical and spiritual nature, although firmly grounded in the concrete, and in the actual natural scene.

The central characters are created with an inwardness lacking in *Greene Ferne Farm;* and they are set in significant relationship with one another. Felise wishes to complete her 'impersonal' love, by natural affection for Martial Barnard. The scene between them on the Downs (Ch. VI) where she strokes his horse Ruy, as though his own hair, anticipates Lawrence's rendering of states below 'the old stable *ego* of the character'. She forces him to look at her;

If once you look over the side of a boat into the clear seas you must continue looking— the depth fascinates the mind. Some depth in, her rapt gaze fascinated him . . . The first moment of awaking to a happy morning, the daylight that means a joyful event; the first view of the sea in youth, when the blue expanse brings tears to the eyes — in these there is some parallel to the sudden, the extreme, and the delicious feeling that shot through him: to reach the ideal of human happiness, it is necessary to be for the moment unconscious of all, except the cause, for that moment he had no consciousness except of her, such was the power of her passion glowing in her face.

Indeed, throughout the book one is frequently reminded of Lawrence by the rendering of the tensions, the inhibitions, the essential life or death of

the psyche. This is particularly the case with Robert Godwin, the methodical, hard, astute steward, who (in significant contrast with Felise) is completely impervious to the life of nature —

> The ground was solid under his feet; the sky afar off a mere translucent roof; the sun a round ball of heat, never seen unless he chanced to be driving westwards towards the sunset . . . he had the faculty of no imagination . . . when his hands were still and his frame reposed, his mind was simply vacant, like that of a horse looking from his stable door, or a dog by his kennel. (Ch. XIX).

However, his whole unimaginative being becomes the prey of his hopeless obsessional desire for Felise. He had seen her playing in a field as a child, and unlike his wont, had not brusquely ordered her away. From this tiny seed grew his never divulged obsession; outwardly unchanged, yet within, his whole being concentrated on Felise in self-destructive passion. He is unable to speak, being from the first hopeless. Prevented from sleeping by the memory of Felise's close presence when she stopped him in the lane to ask how he acquired Martial's horse, all he can do throughout the night is dig in his garden, work at his accounts and tidy old lumber, which is no true relief.[6]

> Her dress had touched him; her breath had reached his cheek. She was coming tomorrow —after nine years she was coming tomorrow! Only to see a horse; but she was coming — she would stand by him again . . . yet it was not Felise; it was Robert Godwin all the time. His feelings were of himself; concentration became ten times more concentrated.

Felise, we are sure, even if she had not married Martial would not have been crippled in soul in this way — her mind is too expansive, and she can take steps to realize her desire, even buying back the horse Ruy from Godwin, to send to Martial. When Godwin finds that Felise is frankly in love with Martial, his frustrated passion turns to utter destructiveness; crazily believing that Martial has possessed her, he waylays Felise, and tries to make his horse trample on her face. She is saved only in the nick of time by Martial, who shoots the horse. After a wild scene at Felise's house, where he has to be forcibly restrained, Godwin returns to the spot where Ruy lies dead, and shoots himself with an old pistol, which he had found in his lumber room the night he had been unable to sleep, and later had meticulously cleaned. The first attempt fails because the powder does not ignite; however, characteristically he at once primes the gun again, and unhesitatingly fires. In the final stages of his spiritual disintegration the excessive orderliness of his bedroom had begun to degenerate into the neglect of the lumber room, reflecting his final inner dissolution.

> Cobwebs had grown in the corner of the casement, and stretched out over the piles of papers.
>
> They were gritty with dust; they had not been touched lately. Dust was thickening the ink; the pen was corroding; fragments of a torn up envelope lay on the floor . . . Old habits were suspended; the touch of the living hand was withdrawn. The pen was not dipped in the ink, the papers remained unmoved, and dust collected in the folds, and spiders spun threads about them.

It will have been noted in the quotations already given that Jefferies can convey the essential soul-life of his characters by vivid and felicitous imagery. Thus Godwin, who is mentally short-sighted, 'held everything as it were, close to his mind, as people with dim sight hold all things close to their eyes.' This quality is seen most clearly in the description of Miller Bond's and his assistant's reactions when Martial, attempting to rescue Felise's maid Polly Shaw, is himself in danger of drowning in the mill pool. The situation is tragically grotesque; the miller and his man gaze downwards in a state of terrorized inaction, powerless to render aid, the man declaring 'Us can't help. You be drownded.' Martial's problem is 'to move their sluggish minds', so that they will make some attempt to help him. For the miller:

> The sight of Mary in the pool had upset the balance of his brain, which had hung level like scales not in use so many years. This rude jolt sent his mind oscillating up and down as if the scales had been struck with a fist. Off went his gun — bang! He danced with his feet. He sucked his forefingers.

When he grasps the meaning which Martial's death will have for Felise, the 'child who had given him four red roses,' (a memory he had treasured for years), the balance is upset more radically:

> 'A gate,' said Martial, 'unhinge a gate! Throw me something that will float!'
> 'Thur!' said the miller with an idiotic grin, plucking off his hat and hurling it into the water, as if Martial could cling to the greasy felt — a straw indeed for a drowning man.
>
> Next came his apron, then a shower of little sticks torn from a fence, then a handful of dock leaves; then he ran to and fro and returned with a heavy iron sheep trough, which he raised above his head.

The image of the scales, for the miller's usual undisturbed mental placidity, and the resulting incapacitating effect of sensational events, is peculiarly apt; indeed the passage shows considerable psychological insight.

The figure of Martial is slighter than those of Felise and Godwin, but it provides another kind of 'love' experience, enriching the central pattern. Having lavished an idealistic affection on the commonplace Rosa, who fails to respond in the way he would wish, although she has sincere affection for him, he attempts at first to hold to her from motives of 'honour' and to fight the attraction of Felise. As he finds himself unable to force himself to marry Rosa, he resolves that never again will he entertain an idealistic affection for a woman. He tries to treat Felise as merely a beautiful picture, although all the poetic quotations he used about Rosa, really apply to *her;* it is only when in danger of drowning in the mill pool that he recognizes and submits to his true affection for her. Yet he only declares his love after he has saved Felise from the disfigurement which Godwin tries to inflict on her. After this, the wounding of his nature heals, and he is able to find fulfilment with Felise.

Rosa (and here again is shown insight) makes a pathetic attempt to quench the grief of her abandonment by filling her window with the choicest flowers, a sad substitute for the happiness to which she had looked forward. Jefferies recognises explicitly the cruelty of life and the potentially

destructive power of beauty; not everyone can be satisfied in his deepest needs.

> How powerful, yet how uncontrollable by ourselves is the influence of our life on the life of others. For Robert Godwin the life, the mere existence of Felise, had been a terrible fate.

In this novel, Jefferies's concern about the social conditions of country life is woven into the texture, providing a subordinate but highly significant theme. The criticism centres in the figure of the Squire, Cornleigh Cornleigh, Esq., who has sat in Parliament for sixteen years, and never made a speech, but always voted 'correctly' at divisions. He is an enigmatic nonentity, whose distinction is a connoisseur's taste in cigars, so that 'it was a common remark in the hotel bars, "This cigar is equal to Cornleigh's" '. Managed by his active wife Letitia, the 'capital thing for Cornleigh', and his steward Godwin, the scenes in which he appears are mordantly ironic. Felise goes (Ch. XXXIII) with old Abner, the aged labourer in danger of eviction as he can no longer work, to the petty court held in his mansion. High walls now surround the once open grounds, even the old church has been pulled down to make way for 'offices'. In the Court Room are elegantly bound, unread volumes of *The Sporting Calendar.* Throughout the proceedings Cornleigh sits with eyes cast down, merely reiterating the words of the clerk, and old Abner's asseveration that he 'knowed yer grandfeyther' is unheeded. The old England where there was a living relationship between Landlord and Tenants (seen for example in Fielding), is shown to have passed away. The Squire behaves similarly (Ch. XLVII) at the political meeting in the town, called ostensibly for the formation of a Society for the Encouragement of Art Culture in the Homes of the Poor, and for the presentation of a testimonial on the completion of his twenty-fifth year of Parliamentary service, but really a first move in the election campaign. After a lush and platitudinously inflated harangue from the Vicar (this speech itself is a masterpiece of satire), Cornleigh garbles the speech which his wife wrote for him, and it is then that Martial is enabled to utter a sweeping condemnation of the *status quo:*

> 'I tell you that there does not exist a race of freemen on the face of the earth who have been so completely under the thumb as the farmers . . . There never will be any more prosperity for English agriculture till the entire system is revised; till a man can cultivate the land free from the vexatious hindrances, medieval hindrances, superstitious hindrances, and burdens such as tithes, ordinary and extraordinary; till there be nothing to contend against but the seasons and the honest competition of the United States . . . from this afternoon I have done with the solicitor, with the parson, with the gardener and the gamekeeper; I have done with the groom, and the whole circle of despicable sycophants!'

The final glimpse of Cornleigh is when, advised by the family solicitor to gain over some opponents by a little cheap attention, he calls on Goring, Felise's uncle, with some engravings to be distributed among the poor. Here the comedy is less bitter, but equally telling.

'Important to raise aspirations, you see,' said Cornleigh. 'Textile fabrics (recurring to his speech), manufactures, trade— hum-ha-hum—supported by agriculture. Hope you will help us, Miss Goring.'

'Mr Cornleigh, I think the poor people need something to eat more than they do pictures,' replied Felise.

It must be noticed that Jefferies does not use the novel as a mere vehicle for his ideas, the scenes with Cornleigh and old Abner are dramatic, the criticism springs from them, they do not seem merely contrived *exempla.*

Again, Jefferies holds a firm balance between the gentry and the labourers; old Abner is pathetic in his trust that 'they'll never put me out of that there garden, bless 'ee', but neither he, nor any of the rustics are idyllicized. On the contrary, after Cornleigh has been deflated in the Court Room, old Abner shows no gratitude for Felise's help, but makes out to his wife that it was her fault that he could not retain the cottage. 'Hur would keep talking. Hur kept on talk, talk, talk...

Ingratitude is the nature of old Abner's race: so many hundred years hard poverty and petty oppression have crushed out the better feelings, especially in the aged. For one act of kindness in eighty years, why should they feel grateful?

Still the fact remains that they are ungrateful, speaking ill of those who wish them well, incapable of understanding goodness of heart: the fact remains and renders them uninteresting and repellent, so that sympathy cannot attach to them. A little experience of their ways is sufficient to destroy the interest of the kindest-hearted.

Felise's visits to Godwin about buying back the horse for Martial, are completely misconstrued; the rural comment is, 'She be looking after old Godwin's gold . . . Hope his money will choke her.' Yet, later, when it is clear that Martial is the object of her affections, it was a matter of common hamlet gossip how Miss Felise had thrown over Mr Godwin 'all of a sudden', and 'took' to 'that there idle Barnard fellow'; not much of a change for her either, for 'hur be a flighty one, hur be'.

Other aspects of the social question are touched on, as the dangers of American competition in corn (Martial cannot make his farm pay), and the fall in the price of land (the Squire is anxious that he should not give up his farm). Indeed a comprehensive picture of the rural conditions of the period is presented.

The life and richness of the essential content of the novel make the occasional technical clumsiness (as the odd discursive comparison of the relative merits of the novel and the drama as literary forms in Ch. XLII) but a minor blemish. Also, one remembers the vivid secondary characters, the lame little silversmith waiting for years for Goring to come to borrow money, which he feels sure he could never repay, so that finally he could possess the farm; or the jealous Miss Barnards, at first lending Felise books on Dante, but when they find out her penniless condition, regarding her as a most unsuitable match for Martial.

The final scene of the book completes the essential rhythm of the whole; another dawn-piece with Felise, married now to Martial, looking over the Downs from her bedroom window:

A pure rest had come to her life. Except to love, and to love fulfilled, and then only to woman, is such rest ever given.

3

Amaryllis at the Fair (1886), the last of this group, was the novel which Edward Garnett declared to be

> One of the very few later day novels of English country life that are worth putting on one's shelf, and that to make room for it, he would turn out certain highly praised novels by Hardy'. (Introduction to *New Readers' Library* edition).

True, there is little 'story', but as Edward Thomas remarks, 'the book has a form dictated solely by Jefferies's mind and soul, by the life he elected to project'.[7] The digressions, as on the health-giving properties of Goliath ale, or the evils and squalors of London life, are not merely thrust in, but spring naturally from the narrative, and from Jefferies's underlying concern for true wholesomeness in life.

The lives of the central characters are most sensitively rendered, while the total attitude expressed surely is not, as perhaps Mr Ascoli would find it, one of 'spiritual confusion', but rather the wisdom springing from a fully mature outlook. We know of course, that Mr and Mrs Iden are drawn from Jefferies's father and mother, but the characters in the novel have a life of their own, and reveal themselves in vivid situations. Iden, whose brooding introspection has ruined his executive powers, discourses at length over dinner about potatoes which he has grown, 'varty-volds' such as can't be obtained elsewhere; he works doggedly in the garden, and surrounds the house with fine apple trees, but these are mere escape-activities: he cannot take strong successful action on practical matters, likely to place his tottering finances on a sound footing. In the afternoon when apparently asleep, he sits resting his head on the wainscot in an agony of thought, while the mice scamper over him — 'That panel was in effect a cross on which a heart had been tortured for a quarter of a century.' We see the London-born Mrs Iden, nervous and fussy, worn out by the stagnation of their life, nagging her husband unmercifully.

> In the passage Mrs Iden was waiting for him and began to thump his broad though bowed back with all her might.
>
> 'Sleep, sleep, sleep,' she cried, giving him a thump at each word. 'You've slept two hours (thump), you sleep till you stupefy yourself (thump) and then you go and dig. What's the use of digging? (thump). Why don't you make some money? (thump) . . . Anything more hateful — sleep (thump), talk (thump), sleep (thump). Go on.'

Old Granfer Iden, bent like an S, but having twenty-thousand guineas in a box under his bed, the baker of 'lardy-cakes', collector of useless but rare books, always seen wearing an ancient 'chimney-pot' hat, and eating in his smoky back room juicy pork to sustain his withered body — he is quite a Dickensian figure. His visit with Amaryllis, on the day of the Fair, to the Pamments' mansion, to the grounds of which he possesses a key, introduces the social theme —

> No one dared to so much as peer through a crevice of the mighty gates. Their persons were encircled with the 'Divinity' that hedges the omnipotent landed-proprietor.

The old man's sycophantic behaviour in the house (particularly as he had just been referred to by young Pamment, who saw him on the lawn, as the 'Behemoth') is exquisite and mordant comedy. His exaggerated rage is equally ludicrous when Amaryllis leaves abruptly, refusing to be treated as a mere half-hour's diversion. Jefferies knew well the pursuits of the 'Barbarians' of his day, revealed in the figure of Pamment junior:

> An idle, lounging, 'bad lot', late hours, tobacco, whiskey, and ballet-dancers writ very large indeed on his broad face.[8]

His valet, Nobbs, imitates him in detail, but (and here Jefferies shows his usual balance) with one significant omission: he has not 'the heart of a gentleman', and does not even wish to have one.

The rustics appear in this novel in their more sympathetic aspects in the clumsy yet likeable farmer Jack Duck, vainly aspiring to marry Amaryllis, or in Jearje the farm hand, eating with uninhibited and magnificent heartiness (Ch. XXIII). But the pettiness of their outlook is indicated by the neighbours regarding Iden as a 'vool' for having a fine field gate made, or by the local surmises that old Iden possesses a key to the mansion grounds, because he lent the exclusive Pamments money— 'They be getting summat out of him. Hoss-leeches, they gentle-folks.'

There is a sad unity of tone throughout, the bloom of life wilting under the futility felt in man's aspirations; a futility rendered the more blighting by the blindness of a money-worshipping society. This tone is set at the outset by a fitting symbol:

> There are no damask roses now like there used to be in the summer at Coombe Oaks. . . There are many grand roses, but no fragrance — the fragrance is gone out of life.

It is maintained by significant incidents: Mrs Iden, exasperated beyond endurance, tramples on the first spring daffodil, which, as it stood delicately beautiful in the bitterly cold March wind, had a few hours earlier brought so very great happiness to Amaryllis's heart. Amaryllis gives up trying to make money by drawing in the utterly chilled attic, discouraged by her parents— 'Ah, you'll never do anything at that. Never do anything. I've seen too much of it. Better come down and warm yourself.' However, with pathetic insistence, she brings the finest flowers of the season up into this room which has witnessed the crushing of her creative talent.

> Wild white violets, a dewdrop as it were of flower, tender and delicate, growing under the great hawthorn hedge, by the mosses and among the dry brown leaves of last year. . . They would have sunk and fallen into the glass, but she hung them by their chins over the edge of the tumbler, with their stalks in the water.

Jefferies's comment on this situation is unequivocal:

> How unnatural it seems that a girl like this, that young and fresh and full of generous feelings as she was, her whole mind should perforce be taken up with the question of money; an unnatural and evil state of things.

Iden stagnates, Amaryllis and Amadis are in love, though she has no money, and he no health. Yet the ending, although it has sombre shadows, emphasizes the life and joy, which are quite real and valuable, even if poignantly transitory.

> ... I will leave them on the brown oak timber, sap-stain brown, in the sunshine and the dancing shadow of summer, among the long grass, and the wild flowers.

The claim has been made then, that the novels show Jefferies's excellences, his faculty of delicate and opulent natural description, his vigorous and felicitous use of the Wiltshire dialect, his power as a social thinker and satirist, his characteristic irony, and his indication of the perennial sources of life — in the most concentrated form, and suggestive relationships.

Notes

[1] 'It is certain that his importance for posterity will dwindle, if it has not already dwindled, to that given by a bundle of descriptive selections.' (*Nineteenth Century Literature.* Ch. IX, p. 397).

[2] Mr. S. J. Looker refers to them as 'three of the finest bucolic novels in the language', but does not substantiate the claim (*The Worthing Cavalcade,* 1946, p. 25)*;* while Q. D. Leavis in a stimulating book review *(Scrutiny,* vol. VI, 4) provides several acute *aperçus,* but does not give extended treatment to any of the novels.

[3] Outside the novels, there is in particular, *Hodge and His Masters,* and essays like 'The Country Sunday' in *Field and Hedgerow.*

[4] Peculiarly happy in this passage is the colloquial 'dot' of the last sentence. It suggests the slight tap heard when the leaf touches the ground, and also the effect of a painter touching in with a quick stroke of his brush, a brown spot on the rich green. The slight suggestion of hardness in 'blades' is resolved by the sonorous 'upborne' which conveys the soft support, as of a luxurious bed, which the grass gives to the leaf.

[5] 'This be the vinest veast you,' said the Ancient, 'this be the vinest veast you as ever I zeed since ould Squire Thorpe — his'n's feyther (nodding his head towards the top of the table) —got up the junketting when the news come of the battle of Waterloo, dree score year ago. The vinest veast althegithcr since ould Bony were whopped. Yellueks!'

[6] This description (Ch. xx) is one of the most suggestively vivid and significant in the book..

[7] *Richard Jefferies,* Aldine Library, 1938, p. 243.

[8] Although in these novels Jefferies's attitude to the country gentry is predominantly critical, that he was not insensible to the beneficient effects of the more exalted aristocratic families upon the district around their rural seat is shown by the appreciative chapter, 'Fleeceborough — a Despot', in *Hodge and his Masters.*