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High Knowledge Into Empty Minds:  
Clym Yeobright's Distracted Didactics in *The Return of the Native*

*Abstract*— This article explores the question of education in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* from the point of view of the didactic aspirations of the novel's main protagonist, Clym Yeobright. Written before the advent of the Education Act, Hardy's novel provides an underlying critique of compulsory education of the masses as well as a questioning of the nature of education through the dramatisation of a range of differing attitudes, from the jealous guarding of traditional rural values to the quest for self-betterment and the romantic desire for escape. In spite of the autobiographical features that went into the creation of Clym, Hardy's avoidance of self-identification with his hero is apparent in his implicit criticism of the pretentiousness of his didactic aims and his representation of his ambivalent character traits. However, an alternative sense resides in the text whereby Clym finally acquires the spiritual awareness and human sympathy he previously lacked through his re-appropriation of the natural values transmitted to him by the natural world of the heath which, in the final analysis, may be considered the real educational force of his life.

Keywords: Hardy, education, didactics, community, humanism

In spite of its central importance, surprisingly little critical attention has been devoted to the theme of education in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1876). Yet, it's hero's decision to abandon his successful and prosperous life in Paris in order to set up a school for the poor and ignorant of his home village becomes the pretext for a critical exploration of the epistemological implications

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involved in educating the culturally neglected as well as a questioning of education as an exclusive element of social distinction.

It is worth pointing out that Hardy's novel was published during the early phases of government legislation over the regulation of national education and precisely six years before the passing of the Elementary Education Act (also known as Forster's Act), which established for the first time the framework for compulsory education of all children in England and Wales between the ages of 5 and 13. The question of public education had always been a cause of political and religious contention and the new legislation was greeted with no less scepticism. Victorians not only mocked the idea of enforced learning without understanding but, as Agnus Wilson has pointed out, viewed it, as "an extension of Benthamite control over the populace, particularly over the masses"<sup>1</sup>, even though the 2,500 new school boards created subsequent to the Act remained independent of local government influence. Given the fact that the setting for *The Return of the Native* pre-dates the Education Act by three decades, Clym's Yeobright's plan to implement what is effectively a compulsory system of education of his own for the benefit of his fellow-men is presented as a foresight. However, the very idea of education in Egdon is either ignored or viewed as a phenomenon that has no bearing on the life of the community. Captain Vye, at the beginning of Book Second, expresses an antagonistic position that would have easily found sympathy with a mid-Victorian readership:

There's too much of that sending to school in these days. It only does harm. Every gate-post or barn's door you come to is sure to have some bad word or other chalked upon it by the young rascals: a woman can hardly pass for shame sometimes. If they'd never been taught how to write they wouldn't have been able to scribble such villainy. Their fathers couldn't do it, and the country was all the better for it<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, London, Arrow Books, 2003, p. 363. See also Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study*, London, Fontana Press, 1991, p. 142 who similarly notes that it was not "the intention of the 1870 Education Act to make this kind of social mobility more accessible" to the working-classes.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Simon Gatrell, Oxford, Oxford

Vye's humorously deterministic rejection of the idea of social or moral improvement through education in the lower orders reflects the Victorian middle-class fear that public education would arouse in the poor and ignorant an awareness of their disadvantaged condition, particularly through access to 'seditious' literature. It is notable that, in their admiration of Clym's worldly success, the villagers (passing over the fact of his educational opportunities) display precisely such an awareness of their lowly condition:

"'Tis a blazing great shop that he belongs to, so I've heard his Mother say. Like a king's palace as far as diments go [...]"  
 "'Tis a good thing for the feller", said Humphrey. "A sight of Times better to be selling dements than nobbling about here". (*RN*, p. 106)

Clym's decision to return to a place which its inhabitants presume he can only regard with condescension and scorn is a matter of bewilderment: "[...] depend upon it" we who have stayed at home shall seem no more than scroff in his eyes" (*RN*, p. 107). His return may be the return of a native, but, since he has chosen to live in a world governed by very different laws, it is not a return as a native. Moreover, his position as outsider in Egdon is ideologically and psychologically reinforced by his absence for the first quarter of the novel during which he is only referred to through the collective viewpoint of the community:

He had been a lad of whom something was expected. Beyond this all had been chaos. That he would be successful in an original way, or that he would go to the dogs in an original way, seemed equally probable. The only absolute certainty about him was that he would not stand still in the circumstances amid which he was born. (*RN*, p. 165)<sup>3</sup>.

University Press, pp. 106-7. Henceforth *RN* in italics in the text followed by page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> This idea is echoed further on: "Something being expected of him, he had not been home many days before a great curiosity as to why he stayed on so long began to arise in the heath". (*RN*, pp. 166-7).

Clym's attempt to overcome the problem of his difference to the villagers by seeking to reconnect with them through the very means that has determined the distance from them in the first place is the major paradox of the novel, especially since his *difference* is a universally acknowledged fact. In this respect, his rediscovery and re-evaluation of his native roots, which has not been triggered so much by his education as his alienating experience in Paris, goes completely against the expectations of the Egdon community. In a poignant scene in which he explains the reason for his return, Clym reveals his moment of epiphany to a group of incredulous villagers:

"I've come home because, all things considered, I can be a trifle less useless here than anywhere else. But I have only lately found this out. when I first got away from home I thought this place was not worth troubling about. I thought our life here was contemptible [...]"

"Well, this became very depressing as time went on. I found that I was trying to be like people who had hardly anything in common with myself. I was endeavouring to put off one sort of life for another sort of life which was not better than the life I had known before. It was simply different" (*RN*, P. 168).

Clym's rejection of this other "sort of life" is interestingly void of criticism. It is simply recognised as unnatural *for him*. Yet his positive reappraisal of Egdon is conditioned by the equally unnatural factor of his didactic plans for the villagers: "I shall keep a school as near to Egdon as possible, so as to be able to walk over here and have a night-school in my mother's house. But I must study a little at first, to get properly qualified" (*RN*, p. 168). His failure to understand that education has no place in the order of things in Egdon is a fundamental shortcoming of the non-native he has become in their eyes. Thus, his discourse only falls on deaf ears:

"He'll never carry it out in the world", said Fairway. "In a few weeks he'll learn to see things otherwise".

"'Tis good-hearted of the young man", said another. "But for my

part I think he had better mind his business". (*RN*, p. 169)

The phrase 'he had better mind his business' seems to literally refer to Clym's Parisian jewellery shop. However a double meaning is also intended that he refrain from interfering with the status quo of the community. It is left to the narrator to articulate explicitly what the villagers feel intuitively: "To argue upon the possibility of culture before luxury to the bucolic world may be to argue truly, but it is an attempt to disturb a sequence to which humanity has long been accustomed" (*RN*, pp. 170-1). Captain Vye again comes closest in expressing the concerns of this conservative world-view: "That lad ought never to have left home. His father's occupation would have suited him best, and the boy should have followed on. I don't believe in these new moves in families. My father was a sailor, so was I, and so should my son have been if I had had one" (*RN*, p. 108). Through Vye's discourse Hardy not only casts Clym's good intentions in an ironic light but simultaneously suggests an implicit criticism of the ideological motives behind the Education Act (particularly that of arousing in the labouring classes the desire for social mobility) which threaten to annihilate the familiar network of centuries-old family traditions of rural communities like Egdon. At the same time, Clym's determination to become the benefactor of his own institution (which his economically advantageous position allows) is undermined by the fact that he has to obtain official qualifications in order to become its sole educator. It is therefore not only the case, as Philip Collins has complained, that "Clym is doing a disservice to his clients"<sup>4</sup> by assuming that knowledge will bring them happiness, (given the apparent discrepancy between what he intends to teach and what he actually knows) as a question of how he intends to do so at all.

As a result of his implicitly critical attitude towards Clym's educational ideals, the reader would be forgiven in understanding Hardy's attitude towards his main character to be unsympathetic.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Page (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background*, London, Bell and Hyman, 1980, p. 63.

His own description of him as “[T]he nicest of all my heroes, and *not a bit* like me”<sup>5</sup>, may appear an attempt to redress the imbalance provoked by his authorial hostility. But when one looks closer one realises that his italicising of the phrase *not a bit like me* highlights an ambivalence that points to the very opposite meaning (i.e. not a bit, but *a lot*)<sup>6</sup>. This is further complicated by the obvious similarities between Hardy and his hero. Like Clym, Hardy chose to move away from a capital city (London) to the provincial world of his origins (Dorchester). Thus, if he intends to represent Clym's return from the intellectual and cultural enlightenment of Paris to Egdon in order to be of educational service to his fellow beings as a regression, it is exactly what he himself did when he turned his back on the equally enlightening world of London to re-affirm his own roots in the rural homeland he would imaginatively serve in his narrative and poetic works. Also, Hardy's formal schooling was brief and, like Clym, was to take the form of intense self-study. However, an even more important means by which the impression of authorial irony or detachment is attenuated lies in the array of positive connotations in Hardy's hero's name. First of all, *Clym* derives from *Clement* (i.e. merciful), but is also a pun on 'climb' which suggests the struggle of his illuminist aspirations as well as his religious conversion at the end of the novel. The symbolic nuances also extend to Clym's surname where the prefix *Yeo* phonically recalls *yew*, (as in the yew tree, a symbol of death, transformation and rebirth); but it also alludes to the prefix in *yeoman* (a figure traditionally associated with loyalty and courage) whilst the suffix *bright* co-refers figuratively to enlightenment (in Clym's case the desire to illuminate others), and on a literal level, firelight. Fire is a recurrent element in the novel and the fires described in Chapter three testify to ancient pagan rites as well as the more recent commemorations of Guy Fawkes Day. But they also recall the Biblical story of Moses and the burning bush —

which signals the presence of God and ultimately the knowledge that surpasses all knowledge. Thus, the surname *Yeobright*, in particular, ingrains and anticipates the essence of Clym's didactic aspirations and his religious conversion. Given these considerations, however, it must also be acknowledged that Clym's positive character traits are countered by the omniscient narrator's ominous attempts to fill in the hermeneutic gaps created by the limitations of his viewpoint. It is no accident, for instance, that the absence of internal focalisation renders certain of his actions, such as his aloofness towards his mother or the contrived nature of his final religious conversion, puzzling. Even more important, the reader is given no insight into the nature of the educational scheme he intends to implement in the village. Phillip Collins, rightly complains of the total lack of information in this sense<sup>7</sup>. For not only does the narrator provide no information regarding the school(s) Clym has attended but his summation of his career is also conspicuously vague (“The details of this choice of a business for him it is not necessary to give” — *RN*, p. 166) and seemingly solely bent on confirming the combination of a strong personality with good fortune: “He grew up and was helped out in life [...] At the death of his father, a neighbouring gentleman had kindly undertaken to give the boy a start” (*RN*, p. 166). However, whilst the terms of Clym's schooling are never explicitly revealed, the phrase *such as the school was* (*RN*, p. 106) uttered by one of the villagers suggests its obvious limitations. As if in confirmation of this, the narrator makes no mention of the books Clym has read or of any of the qualifications he has received, let alone the writers and thinkers who may have inspired or influenced him. Similarly, the hazy reference to the popular ethical systems of the day that have attracted Clym's attention can only be inferred. In light of the historical context, it may be presumed that the allusion is to August Comte<sup>8</sup>, whose Positivist philosophy was, of course, a

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 520.

<sup>6</sup> N. Page (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 62 where Collins also notes “the emphasis alerts anyone familiar with (Hardy) to the possibility that untruth or self-deception is lurking hereabouts [...]”.

<sup>7</sup> N. Page (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61 where Collins notes that Clym's “missionary zeal and his spontaneous effort outside the State system are [...] in line with the ideas of Comte [...]”.

lifelong influence on Hardy's own intellectual development. Although Clym appears to display little in his general outlook to suggest an absorption of Comte's ideas, there is a strong sense of altruism evidently derivative of Comte's theory of the religion of humanity in the charitable nature of his didactic mission:

"There is no chance of getting rich. But with my system of education, which is as new as it is true, I shall do a great deal of good to my fellow-creatures".

"Dreams, dreams! If there had been any other system left to be invented they would have found it out at the Universities long before this time".

"Never, mother. They cannot find it out, because their teachers don't come in contact with the class that demands such a system — that is, those who have had no preliminary training. My plan is one for instilling high knowledge into empty minds without first cramming them with what has to be uncrammed again before true study begins" (*RN*, p 198).

Although Clym's concerns voice a common nineteenth-century criticism of standardised public education, he does not expound his proposed educational programme in any further detail. Also, whilst his condemnation of an elitist-oriented educational world, anticipates the central preoccupation of Hardy's final novel, *Jude the Obscure*, there is no such elusiveness in the references to Jude Fawley's education, which include definite names, surnames, titles of books and schools of thought. Furthermore, Jude's remarkable capacity for learning (however misguided) is consistently highlighted in the novel as unusually admirable. The fact that Clym, on the other hand, is compelled to embark on a course of self-study in order to obtain the necessary qualifications to become a village schoolmaster (the same position, incidentally, as Richard Phillotson at the beginning of *Jude the Obscure*) only confirms his apparent educational drawbacks<sup>9</sup>. Most importantly

<sup>9</sup> Hardy made considerable alterations in subsequent versions of the novel regarding Clym's cultural and moral stature which, in the final analysis, seem to reflect the unease and embarrassment of his own educational disadvantages.

is the narrator's silence surrounding Clym's Parisian life<sup>10</sup>, particularly when one considers the fact that the 1840s was one of the most chaotic as well as one of the most intellectually fervent decades in French history. However, the omission is also telling. For the novel narrates Clym's departure from the centre and vortex of the fashionable world (*RN*, 109), a city brimming with historical and cultural significance and return to the place of his origins — a place on which time makes but little impression but has an important bearing on Clym's early formation.

As a "vast tract of unenclosed wild" (*RN*, 9) antithetic to civilisation (for "[C]ivilisation was its enemy" — *RN*, 11)<sup>11</sup>, textual evidence abounds to underline the overwhelming influence Egdon Heath has exerted on the boy Clym: "He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance and with its odours. He might be said to be its product." (*RN*, 171). The reader is told that "Clym had been so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him" (*RN*, 166). What is most significant is the extent to which the heath is described through terms associated with education: "[...] nobody could be said to *understand* the heath who had not been there at such a time [...]" (*RN*, 9). It is a place "[...] in keeping with the moods of the more *thinking of mankind*" (*RN*, p. 10). Again, we told "[I]t was an obsolete thing, and few cared to *study* it" [*RN*, p. 171]. It also appeals "to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently *learnt* emotion" (*RN*, p. 10). The heath is assigned a special language of its own which is lost on Eustacia Vye, since "[T]o dwell on a heath without *studying* its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without *studying* his *tongue*" (*RN*, p. 70 my emphases).

<sup>10</sup> See John Paterson, *The Making of "The Return of the Native"*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1978, p. 62. Paterson observes that Clym's "essential provinciality was not perceptively affected by the Parisian experience". He also makes the point that Clym's "range as a scholar and thinker was broadened in the first edition where he was said to 'know the classics too'" (p. 64).

<sup>11</sup> Against the impersonal presence of the heath and its representation as antithetic to human knowledge may also be set the accumulated 'wisdom' of the centuries-old folklore and superstitions of the villagers which constitute an alternative form of education to that of the *enlightened* world of post-renaissance rationality and science.

There is indeed an intrinsic connection established from the outset between Clym and the heath which is borne out on both a physical and psychological level. Thus, as the timeless presence of the heath is rendered in the transitional moment of the day in which neither daylight nor darkness appear to dominate, so do the competing forces of darkness and light in Clym's features in which there is a "natural cheerfulness striving against depression from without, and not quite succeeding" (*RN*, p. 135) convey an analogous sense of non-definability and a-temporality. Moreover, like the heath's, Clym's is a face upon which time makes but little impression. For it is experience and not time that has aged him: "To one of middle age the countenance was that of a young man, though a youth might hardly have seen any necessity for the term of immaturity [...] The face was well shaped [...] but the mind within was beginning to use it as a mere *waste* tablet" (*RN*, p. 135) – interestingly, the same lexeme occurs in a phrase referring to the heath as a "glory of the Egdon *waste*". Clym's self-appointed role as a man of education is also belied by the fact that his very countenance reverts the relationship between study and object of study: "His countenance was overlaid with legible meanings" (*RN*, p. 135); "The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but by *his face as a page*" (*RN*, p. 165). Just as Egdon has a language that can be learnt, so has Clym's face the likeness of a book that can be read. But this textual image of an aging face has a negative valence that is contrasted in the novel with the positive symbolic lettering of the sheep by Diggory Venn (a man who, for his moral fortitude and capacity to accept disappointment and discouragement, may be considered a more pertinent educator than Clym Yeobright).

Although it constitutes the motivating force behind his return, Clym's educational project becomes *the* understated feature of the novel. On the one hand, the effect of its vague conception is to deflate his ideological presumptions. For, as far as his ambition to educate his fellow villagers by instilling in them a conviction of the supremacy of the wisdom of cultural enlightenment over the affluence of social elevation is concerned, this reflects a Humanistic, not to say elitist, faith in the perfectibility of man which would cast Clym in the same league as Matthew Arnold's "true apostles of

equality"<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, his attitude reflects an endorsement of Arnold's ideal of social regeneration through the study of "the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere"<sup>13</sup>. Clym's appeal to a higher knowledge points to a course with similar moral aims. However, his humanistic ideal would have been regarded by any Victorian reader as a typical feature of middle-class education, and certainly not applicable, or even appropriate, to the working-classes. The narrator himself hints at the fallaciousness of his arrogant assumptions: "He had a conviction that the want of most men was knowledge [...]" The very structure of this sentence reveals an undermining of his viewpoint with the initial position in the clause of "he had a conviction" placing the emphasis on supposition rather than objective fact. Furthermore, the question of education is subjected to the conflicting notions of the two women in Clym's life. For Eustacia Vye, it represents a pretext to escape from her depressing existence in Egdon: "The perfervid woman was by this time half in love with a vision. The fantastic nature of her passion, which lowered her as an intellect, raised her soul. If she had had a little more self-control she would have attenuated the emotion to nothing by sheer reasoning, and so have killed it off" (*RN*, p. 117). The narrator qualifies her excited feelings in terms of an intellectual disintegration in which her perception of Clym as a man of education stops short at her own romantic reverie. It is ironic in this light that the villagers make an immediate association between Clym and Eustacia earlier in the novel based on their educational standing:

"Now I should think, Cap'n, that Miss Eustacia had about as much in her head that comes from books as anybody about here".

"Perhaps if Miss Eustacia, too, had less romantic nonsense in her head it would be better for her", said the Captain shortly, after which he walked away.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

"I say, Sam", observed Humphrey when the old man was gone; "she and Clym Yeobright would make a very pretty pigeon pair — hey? If they wouldn't I'll be dazed! Both of one mind about niceties for certain, and learned in print, and always thinking about high doctrine — there couldn't be a better couple if they were made o' purpose [...]" (RN, p. 107)

The dialogue humorously exposes their ignorance of the difference between Clym and the romantically-minded Eustacia. That the latter reads more books than the other villagers says nothing about her cultural status. But the fact that she does leads even Clym into believing her to be a "cultivated woman" (RN, p. 142) during his first meeting with her after the mummers' play. Yet, far from occupying herself with "high doctrine", Eustacia is a schemer attempting to wile her way out of her miserable existence in the village and displays no inclination whatsoever to participate in Clym's teaching venture. For Clym's mother, on the other hand, education represents the sole means of social betterment. Thus, her repulsion at the idea of Clym's project is explained by her dismay that such an initiative constitutes a definite *faux pas*: "After all the trouble that has been taken to give you a start, and where there is nothing to do but to keep straight on, you say you will be a poor man's schoolmaster. Your fancies will be your ruin, Clym" (RN, p. 172). Interestingly, her accusation of Clym as a romantic daydreamer again equates him with Eustacia, whose propensity to daydream triggers the tensions between the couple that leads to her tragic end.

D.H. Lawrence, one of Hardy's acutest critics, accuses Clym of a "subtle equivocation" in his altruistic, but deep down cowardly act, of attempting to improve mankind rather than "undertake his own soul"<sup>14</sup>. This would be an astute observation were it not for the fact that Hardy provides no textual evidence, explicit or implicit, to suggest that Clym's didactic aspirations are a distraction from his "struggle at the quick of himself into being"<sup>15</sup>. Yet there is no

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Beal (ed.), *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism*, London, William Heinemann, 1955, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

doubt that his blindness represents a spiritual cleansing and leads to a new awareness in which the hard grind of daily experience is given priority over learning. Indeed, to the chagrin of his wife, Clym almost relishes his outdoor activity as a furze-cutter which he is compelled to perform in order to earn a living. It is significant that this manual labour brings about a complete metamorphosis in which the hard self-centredness that marked his intellectually-oriented spirit vanishes:

His familiars were creeping and winged things, and they seemed to enrol him in their band. Bees hummed around his ears with an intimate air, and tugged at the heath and the furze-flowers at his side in such numbers as to weigh them down to the sod. The strange amber-coloured butterflies which Egdon produced, and which were never seen elsewhere, quivered in the breath of his lips, alighted upon his bowed back, and sported with the glittering point of his hook as he flourished it up and down. Tribes of emerald-green grasshoppers leaped over his feet [...] Huge flies ... buzzed about him without knowing that he was a man (RN, p. 244).

This lyrically conveyed encounter between human and insect world is also the theme of Hardy's poem "An August Midnight" in which four insects invade the poet's room and smear the ink of his *newly-penned line*<sup>16</sup>. Yet, there is an important contrast between the two scenes in that whilst in Hardy's poem the insects initiate in the speaker a series of philosophical musings over the enigmatic nature of existence, here Clym is depicted as being in a state of such oblivion to his surroundings that he becomes almost interchangeable with them<sup>17</sup>. Not only, but the activity of the

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson, ed., p. 147, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1976, p. 147: "My guests besmear my new penned line, / Or bang at the lamp and fall supine".

<sup>17</sup> See Francesco Marroni, "Metapoetic Liminality: Thomas Hardy and the Making of a Lyric", *The Hardy Society Journal*, II, 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 19-35. In his profoundly insightful analysis of the epistemological implications which arise over the encounter between the poetic voice and the four insects in "An August Midnight", Marroni highlights the enigmatic nature of man's relationship with the universe through the encounter between man and insect in terms of a

insects is characterised by the playful delicacy and tenderness of a mutual acceptance (*intimate* [...] *quivered* [...] *sported*) through which he loses his individual self and his being becomes a process of experiencing (as well as being reconciled to) the heath.

As a result, it comes as no surprise that, after the emotional crisis following the deaths of his mother and Eustacia Clym's life is reduced to three objectives, none of which have any connection with his educational project: "One was his almost daily walk to the little graveyard wherein his mother lay; another his just as frequent visits by night to the more distant enclosure which numbered Eustacia among its dead; the third was self-preparation for a vocation which alone seemed likely to satisfy his cravings – that of an itinerant preacher of the eleventh commandment" (*RN*, p. 376). At this point, he is able to admit his pretentiousness in presuming to *illuminate* others whilst he himself lacked the assurance to conduct his own personal affairs: "I who was going to teach people the higher secrets of happiness did not know how to keep out of that gross misery which the most untaught are wise enough to avoid" (*RN*, p. 302). Unlike Jude Fawley, who is never allowed such self-enlightenment, Clym's recognition of his errors as a son and husband testify to a new knowledge that gives daily experience priority over didactic learning. Significantly, his final religious vocation, which completes a process that has taken him full circle from *wild and perceptive heath lad* to *itinerant preacher*, links the two dimensions of heath and education that underpin Clym's moral and ideological being. For in his open-air lecturing he finds his potential pupils in the people he encounters on his travels and, in doing so, cultivates a spiritual awareness through which he not only accepts the community of Egdon on its own terms but can include it in a comprehensive vision that encompasses all the social milieu he encounters during his Evangelical self-mission. In this respect, Clym's original project is turned on its head. For now, it is the people who dictate the content and manner

secret knowledge they do not share. In a similar way, the insects communicate their own invisible knowledge to the unconscious Clym who has by now forfeited his pursuit of his didactic plans.

of his message as he finds himself: "[...] speaking not only in simple language on Blackbarrow and in the upland hamlets round, but in a more cultivated strain elsewhere — from the steps and porticoes of Town-halls, from market-crosses, from conduits, on esplanades and on wharfs, from the parapets of bridges, in barns and outhouses and all other such places" [...] (*RN*, p. 389). Yet, far from being an inefficient preacher<sup>18</sup>, Clym delivers his spiritual message with a linguistic and discursive flexibility that are indicative of his intelligence, alertness and keen sensitivity to his listeners whose variety and number surpass those he ever imagined reaching with his original didactic plan.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel R. Schwartz's "Beginnings and Endings in Hardy's Major Fiction" in Dale Kramer (ed.), *Critical Approaches to the Fictions of Thomas Hardy*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 23. Schwartz's comment that Clym's preaching is "limited and self-indulgent" finds no justification in the text. Furthermore, his suggestion that "the emphasis on the penultimate sentence is upon his ineffectuality as a preacher" concerns a series of clauses reporting the contrasting opinions of the communities he encounters and is not intended as an authorial intervention or comment by the narrative voice.