Chapter 2 of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) opens by describing Marlott, the village where Tess was born. But the passage goes beyond mere description by providing the reader with important aesthetic directives. After locating the village geographically in “the Vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor” and noting that tourists and landscape painters have usually avoided the valley, Hardy’s narrator predicts that its beauty will attract future visitors. Yet he quickly chills the enthusiasm of such prospective viewers. After initially asserting that the fertile spot never succumbs to dried-up springs or brown fields, he now calls attention to the “droughts of summer” only to recite further obstacles: poor ways to travel, difficult roads, and consequent disappointments one might want to avoid. The narrator then reverses himself again by insisting that any traveler from the coast will inevitably be “delighted” by contrasts between the calcareous downs and lush cornlands (*T*, ii, p. 18).

It is easy to misread these oscillations in emphasis as something approaching equivocation. Yet, quite to the contrary, Hardy here conditions his readers by exposing them to a multitude of conflicting impressions. Offering different reasons for coming to the valley, different routes, and different kinds of walks, he introduces further variables by mentioning the pace of arrival, vertical/horizontal positionality, weather, time of year, and decisions about whether to come with a guide or alone. And, by including the two names used for the valley, Blakemore and Blackmoor, he suggests that place-names are socially constructed and that any meanings we ascribe to settings are as historically conditioned as our impressions of people or events.

Hardy’s description of the valley is thus neither simply figural nor symbolic, but epistemological. It discourages the reader from making an easy analogy between the unspoiled valley and the purity of Tess, or from making the topography serve any understanding of future events. The description refuses to offer the guidance provided, for instance, by Jane
Austen’s symbolic description of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy’s country estate in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is not to deny that in many landscape descriptions Hardy establishes correspondences between the “soul” of a landscape and a human drama enacted by characters. But the drama enacted here is primarily that of coming to a new scene and it is a drama enacted by readers, rather than the nameless figures Hardy casts as tourists and painters.

Hardy here knowingly destroys a common literary convention, employed not only by Austen but by many other authors, novelists, and poets. Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, and Percy Shelley offer symbolic landscapes in which each detail is endowed with emblematic significance by the perspective of a central narrator or strong poetic “I” who acts as the repository of sure, omniscient, and omnipresent wisdom. Here, instead, the narrator very much stresses every point of view as equally noteworthy and limited.

Prior critics of Hardy and of this novel have debated such issues as elements of narrative, imagery, philosophy, and the relationship of the author to his heroine (Bayley, DeLaura, Gregor, Howe, Lawrence, Lodge, Miller). Others have looked carefully at the novel and tragic form (Kramer). Some have read the novel sociologically (Williams, Goode, Wotton). Several critics have explored gender and class issues (Ingham, Boumelha, Brady, Morgan, Higonnet). A few have attended carefully to language use (Taylor) and jarring aspects of style (Zabel, Kincaid, Widdowson).

With a few important exceptions, such as Kincaid and Widdowson, critics who have studied Hardy’s style, whether in passing or more fully, have read his novels pre-eminently through a realist, humanist lens. Their comments inevitably are cast in terms of a personal split they read either from Thomas Hardy the man into his work or from that work back onto the “nature” of the man. *Tess*, such critics say, acutely reflects such a division. The novel’s intellectualism, marked by philosophical musings and cultural quotations, strikes them as being at odds with a high value placed on natural simplicity and purity.

Usually astute readers such as John Bayley and J. B. Bullen have thus offered explanations for a schizophrenic artistry. Some point to Hardy’s class origin and subsequent rise; some explain this split as one of mental control and sad lapses. They name the two aspects of Hardy’s creative personality: “consciousness and unconsciousness,” “two voices,” or “two views.” Simon Gatrell’s introduction to *Tess*, with more sophistication, offers a fantasy of two Thomas Hardys and rejects it in favor of a composite. His composite goes beyond a dialogue, struggle, or stand-off
between two Thomas Hardys. One of the few novel critics to connect Hardy with Keats, Gatrell argues that Hardy could also “rest in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (“Introduction,” T, Oxford Classics Edition, p. xx.). Still, Gatrell returns to connect this “habit of mind” to “opposing insights of two Thomas Hardys.” Hardy’s narrative openness has still to be fully linked to the historical moment and the intellectual traditions informing it. Moreover, this capacity to rest in uncertainties must be viewed as more than a simple duality. Rather, mental, emotional, philosophical, and ideological checks and balances are translated into a highly self-conscious interplay of narrative agents.

Only two critics, to my knowledge, explain the formal and ideological fractures of Hardy’s texts in terms of the historical moment. Terry Eagleton and John Goode, moving beyond an older Marxist criticism, point persuasively to an historical break between experience and value and a subsequent change in the traditional handling of pastoral, a break which makes its way into Hardy’s novels. In brief remarks on the Dynasts, Isobel Armstrong has supplemented such insights by connecting Hardy with the radical intellectual context of his time. Yet it is significant that no critic reads Hardy novels through self-consciously experimental Victorian poetry which drew heavily on that radical context.

With its emphasis on what we see, how we know and nominate, how we experience, how a thing can be viewed in different ways at the same time, and how something may affect us physically, mentally, and emotionally – the description of Marlott, with which I began, glosses Hardy’s aesthetic undertaking in Tess. Hardy’s aesthetic demands that readers grasp reality as objectively varied, changing, filtered by multiple and contradictory subjective impressions, and yet indubitably and solidly there when apart from human consciousness. The description of Marlott not only positions the reader geographically, then, for it also serves as an introductory directive on subject and method.

At every narrative level, as I will show, Hardy relies on multiplicity and incongruity. He adopts these strategies within a general structural framework of tragic and ironic ambiguity. In doing so, Hardy questions the very foundations of traditional representation and belief. He wants his reader to become conditioned into thinking simultaneously in terms that are multiple and even contradictory. Tess must be seen in relation to a larger nineteenth-century intellectual context provided by earlier writers who rely on similar aesthetic strategies put to radical ends. As I will show, writers as diverse as Carlyle, Browning, and Ruskin, as well as lesser-known figures such as William Johnson Fox, had stressed the
alienated modern consciousness that Hardy so powerfully dramatizes in this novel.

In defining Hardy’s aesthetic, it is well to remember his extremely important remarks about realism and vision, as well as his specific comments about *Tess*. Hardy is fundamentally anti-realistic. He does not practice a mimetic art which reproduces a likeness of the external world and draws that world into comprehension through an omniscient narrator we are asked to trust. Nor does he present a teleological narrative based on the development of a character with clear cause-and-effect results. Though, as a pre-eminent story-teller, he does not abandon mimesis completely, Hardy undermines the bases of mimetic representation. For him, realism is a “student’s style” (*LW*, p. 192).

Nowhere in Hardy’s writings do we get a fully articulated aesthetic. Yet several statements of the late 1880s and early 1890s prove unusually helpful, especially when Hardy defines art as a deformation of reality: “Art is a disproportioning – (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence ‘realism’ is not Art” (*LW*, p. 239). A notable example of such “disproportioning” in *Tess*, perhaps even a self-mocking of such distortions, is the scene where Mrs. Brooks of *The Herons* notices a red spot in the middle of her white ceiling, a spot which grows in size until it begins to drip blood (*T*, lvi, p. 369).

Hardy’s imagination is primarily visual, as is attested by his painting-like set pieces and his many poetic effects. He told at least two of his biographers that mental pictures usually preceded the formulation of his ideas in language. The word “impression,” related to the notion of a mental picture, arises often in his writings, including a defense of the novel *Tess*. In his 1895 Preface to the Fifth and Later editions, Hardy claims that a novel is not an intellectual argument, but an “impression,” that is, a general tone or effect imprinted on the mind, emotions, and eyes of the reader.

Hardy’s interest in the peculiarities of perception led him to favor those nineteenth-century English painters who distorted reality in order to bring out specifics that might otherwise be overlooked. For instance, instead of merely reproducing a boat in a storm, Turner, whom Hardy much admired, painted what he felt as the essence of storm: wind, turbulent waves, spray. Hardy delights in “the tragical mysteries” Turner has plumbed and maintains that his prose seeks “the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings” (*LW*, p. 192).

Such an “abstract imagining” even informs the title-page of *Tess*, which
The radical aesthetic of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* includes the phrase “a pure woman faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy.” Most critics rightly argue that “pure,” when modifying “woman,” can carry multiple meanings, such as *essence of, chaste, wholly,* and *good.* Yet I prefer to focus on “faithfully presented.” Since Hardy’s presentation cannot be faithful in the sense of absolutely true or accurate, his use of the word is both ironic and sincere. How, then, and to whom, is the telling faithful? Gatrell suggests, in the fantasy he constructs of two Hardys, that Hardy remains faithful to his first, unconscious conception of an ideal Tess; countering such a view, Peter Widdowson holds that “faithfully presented” is only ironic. I would make a somewhat different case. Hardy’s narrative mode challenges conventionally faithful presentation, but is faithful, instead, to an authorial aesthetic of incongruity. Hardy is thus ironic about faith, but also serious in offering a new kind of narrative fidelity.

Most reviewers of *Tess* in both its serial and book versions, however, failed to grasp Hardy’s stylistic challenge to conventional narrative. They specifically blamed him for indecorous language, indecency, and irreligiosity. Attending specifically to style, one critic went so far as to complain that Hardy is “writing like a man who has been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps, or in plain English, of making experiments in a form of language which he does not seem clearly to understand.” Hardy’s intellectual poverty, he complains, leads inevitably to a coarseness and a want of good taste (Mowbray Morris in the *Quarterly Review*, quoted by Cox, p. 220).

*Tess,* however, relies on a self-conscious send-up of standard narrative conventions not only for its aesthetic effects, but also for its political and ethical effects, which should not be divorced from discussion of its artistic form. The general story and the plot, by which I mean the choice and organization of events and the temporal order into which they are arranged, were hardly unique in fiction at that time. A young girl’s violation by one man and abandonment by another leads to tragic consequences for all. The temporal order of events is reassuringly sequential, yet linearity is doubly complicated. First, Hardy places the violation early, thus exploding the romance form by leaving space to treat a fallen life. Moreover, he fits the violation within a pattern of progressive loss for Tess, not gain.

Hardy also complicates linearity by introducing time schemes other than the strictly teleological. He thereby forces the question, repeatedly, of whether a seemingly isolated event is part of a larger pattern, or not. Gillian Beer has referred to a triple layering of plot in a Hardy novel: Predictive (agency usually of the character’s making) as when Joan dresses Tess in white to go to Alec; Optative (seen through “if only” comments by the narrator and characters), as when the narrator says “if only” Tess’s...
guardian Angel had been in the Chase protecting her; and the plot of Nature’s Laws (blind interaction, randomness, determinism) seen in statements such as “Thus the thing began” (T, v, p. 45). In addition to these temporal frames, Hardy draws on cosmic or cyclical time, family historical continuum of crime and punishment, cycles of retribution in a transgenerational class drama, and a patriarchal inevitability of results. For instance, the book is divided into “Phases.” To be sure, the word can refer to periods of development in a linear pattern, as in Thomas Carlyle’s use of it with regard to history. But “phases” can also refer to phases of the moon and thus to lunar/solar/tidal time. Tess’s story is divided into sections that imply larger time schemes embodying her tale, but the word is multivalent and remains so.

Moreover, Tess’s story is also placed in a history of repeated events, as part of a cycle, or, through analogy, as a regional myth. Crimes by the aristocratic d’Urbervilles, for example, may be related to Tess’s barbaric murder of Alec, and, hence, run in the family. On the other hand, events can also be attributed to lasting class inequities and retribution cycles. The narrator wonders, for instance, if Tess has to be violated by a man superior in wealth, if not worth, because her aristocratic ancestors, the d’Urbervilles, “rollicking home from a fray,” had dealt out the same fate to peasant girls (T, xi, p. 77). Angel reinforces the connection, depressing Tess, when he mentions the legend of the d’Urberville coach and the ancestor who committed a dreadful crime in it (xxxiii, p. 212). Tess’s fate is also placed, by analogy and in disguised form, in the mythified historical tales of her district. Marlott’s valley was formerly known as the Forest of White Hart, ever since a beautiful doe, spared by the King, was killed by one Thomas de la Lynd (ii, pp. 18-19). Tess’s bitter phrase “Once victim, always victim: that’s the law” (xlvii, p. 321) suggests the workings of a harsh inexorability, which overdetermines her own use of violence within a cycle of power struggles and revenge. As explanations of Tess’s fate, however, such “laws” – whether human, institutional, or cosmic – remain partial, random, and incomplete. Uninterested in single answers, Hardy prefers to look at the many ways we (alternately and not uniformly) assign structures to motivations, actions, and fates.

Fascinated by the different meanings we assign to events, Hardy complicates their causal relation as much as their temporal arrangement. His handling of plot, therefore, goes against the grain of much nineteenth-century fiction. Other novelists writing of fallen women, say Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, or George Eliot, might have linked violation to its traditional consequences of death or religious conversion. But Hardy is not content to dwell on the triad of fall, punishment, and redemption. Tess
must be consistently misread, then abandoned, reduced to hard labor, humiliated into a return to her first victimizer, driven to murder, and forced to surrender herself, before she is allowed to be killed.

There is an aesthetic reason and a political reason for this overwriting of Tess’s fate. As Hardy himself notes, he demolishes the “doll of English fiction” (Letters i, p. 250; to H. W. Massingham) once and for all by not only rewriting the traditional heroine and her story, but also our relation to her. Violating traditional contracts with novel readers, he aggressively assaults an audience whose subtlety of understanding he repeatedly tests. Alec-like, he lures us into a fictional world to raise and violate our Angel-like desire for some monolithic essence of female purity. And he challenges our narrator-like sentimental and patriarchal wishfulness by showing that a violated woman can not “get over” her ordeals, as if she were just putting on new clothes.

Whereas in a classical tragedy, cause-and-effect explanations may elucidate a character’s fate, Hardy makes sure that no one reason for Tess’s fate can stand out among the many offered, because no one choice Tess might have made could have redirected her life. There is also no particular quality which she harbors that undoes her, unless it is, ironically, her sheer excellence as a human being. A series of relatively minor and logically unrelated events and facts are responsible for her fate, everything from her mother’s not educating her properly about designs of some men, to the death of Prince, her family’s horse, to Angel’s not selecting her from the dancers at the start. Since each of these facts or events can similarly be attributed to multiple causes, a search for origins proves to be as doomed as Tess herself.

A look at one significant component of that set of events, the impalement of the horse Prince, which contributes to Tess’s having to go to work for the d’Urbervilles, yields a host of causes. They include her father’s drunkenness, which prevents him from taking the early morning journey to deliver the beehives, her mother’s procrastination, which delays the trip, Tess’s excessive sense of responsibility, Tess’s allowing Abraham to sleep, Tess’s own drowsiness and hence her obliviousness to the mail coach, the fact that her wagon light has gone out, the bad road conditions which slow her journey and possibly cause Prince to wander to the wrong side of the highway, the mail cart’s speed, and, not least, the “blighted” star on which they live (T, iv, p. 35).

Moreover, in the single most important event of the novel, Alec’s violation of Tess, Hardy undermines the notion of a narrative’s central event. He indicates that something pivotal occurred, but clouds it in obscurity. We hear that in the Chase, on that night, Tess’s “self” was altered.
irrevocably, for the narrator laments it as the point between “previous” and present selves (T, xi, p. 77). We know that she eventually bears Alec’s child. But exactly what happened, how it happened, and why it happened are not easy to ascertain.

Like other very important moments in the novel, say Tess’s confession to Angel, her murder of Alec, or her execution, the facts and details of the violation scene remains unnarrated. To be sure, Victorian propriety would necessitate coding or silence about sexual intercourse. Still, there is a distinct pattern here of key scenes omitted, a pattern for which Victorian propriety can not be the only reason. The night scene is marked by fog and confusion. When Alec returns, Tess is sound asleep. It remains unclear whether Alec rapes or seduces Tess. Whether Tess fights being raped or surrenders with half-willingness remains equally veiled, because, quite simply, the narrator does not tell us, nor does any character ever say.

Moreover, unless one is wedded to a realist series of explainable feelings and events in time or cardboard figures playing out predictable dramas, which Hardy is not, it is difficult to interpret Alec in this scene. Some readers resist a three-dimensional Alec. They despise him as a manipulating, power-hungry cad. Yet, Hardy repeats here what he is wont to do in other novels, for example with commedia dell’arte-inspired figures in The Trumpet-Major (1880). He draws on a known stereotype in outrageously obvious ways only to subvert that stereotype’s very obviousness.

This scene is purposely ambiguous about Alec as well as Tess. It is unclear whether Alec’s feelings of “genuine doubt” as to their location, his desire to “prolong companionship” with Tess, and whatever feeling compels him to violate her innocence are, on this night, in perpetual mixture or are developmental. That is, it is never revealed to us whether the agent, Alec, knows from the start that he will violate her or whether he stumbles into it as the occasion offers him a perfect opportunity. Likewise, it is unclear whether disregard for a lower-class woman, her possible confusion, the lust of a moment, or continuing passion makes him do it. Lust, passion, or taking advantage of the situation as it develops do not exculpate his deed, any more than dark intention. What he does has tragic consequences. Appropriately, the representation of this key event is marked by profound ambiguity concerning his feelings and motives and her responses.

Understanding the relation between Tess and Alec in the Chase is made even more problematic for readers by textual statements recorded both before and after the fact. For instance, when Alec feeds Tess strawberries, Tess accepts “whatever d’Urberville offered her” in a “half-pleased, half-reluctant state” (T, v, p. 44). The reader must weigh whether or not this
half-pleasure is repeated later. An allusion such as that to “Lotis attempting to elude Priapus, and always failing” (T, x, p. 67), used of the dancers whom Tess watches, suggests Tess is not receptive and Alec is forceful. Then, how are we to interpret Tess’s later explanation to Alec that she hates herself for her “weakness” and that her eyes were “dazed . . . a little” (T, xii, p. 83). In what context do we judge the narrator’s claim that Tess had been “made to break an accepted social law” (T, xiii, p. 91)? Critics of the novel often draw on these and other statements in order to extract coherence from a scene, which, as I’ve tried to show, resolutely resists any interpretation founded on logic, cause and effect, or precedents offered by tradition and stereotype.

Still, our interpretation of the rest of the book is much affected by the way in which we view Alec’s violation of Tess. A 1996 e-mail debate among Victorianists on VICTORIA LIST reproduced in minuscule a range of responses by major critics of the last twenty-five years to the events in the Chase. Some critics seem to have implicitly agreed with Michael Millgate’s 1971 contention that Hardy’s ambiguous treatment of Tess’s moments of crisis is to be applauded for a “restraint that is eloquent of artistic maturity” (Career as a Novelist, p. 280). In other words, Hardy’s obfuscation about what happened is part of conscious artistic effect. Others decided that Alec’s violation was a “rape,” preceded and followed by harassment. William Morgan, who thinks so (according to his contribution to this e-mail discussion), thus shares the view expressed by Simon Gatrell in his and Juliet Grindle’s recent Oxford Classics edition of the novel: “Alec d’Urberville, everyone agrees, is little more than a cardboard cut-out, two-dimensional rapist and bounder” (“Introduction,” T, p. xxii). For his part, though, Keith Wilson, in another e-mail contribution, appears to agree with Ian Gregor’s 1974 view that the encounter in the Chase is, ambiguously, both a seduction and a rape. But Wilson reads the ambiguity as thought-through, ethical, and political: it is a “deliberate attempt on Hardy’s part to explode and expose stereotypical responses,” including “easy moral categories.”

The critical debate about the Chase scene persistently raises issues of authorial self-consciousness and execution. Some critics believe that those who read ambiguity into the prose are aestheticizing a rape scene which Hardy expects his readers unequivocally to condemn. Others maintain that Hardy’s ambiguity stems from his own confusion as a late-Victorian, who simply did not know the difference between rape and consensual sex. Still others, willing to credit him with a deliberate aesthetic and ideological agenda, believe that he knowingly blurred the scene in order to challenge the Victorian response to a fallen woman. My own sense is that aesthetic
ambiguity and ethical re-vision are inextricably intertwined for Hardy; to argue for one over the other or without the other therefore encourages a misreading of the entire novel.

Hardy’s text asks his readers to understand the relativity of their values and judgments. Does this mean that he is a relativist or that he is confused about rape and consensual sex? No. It means that he sees stereotypical values and judgments (whether against the woman: “blame the victim,” against the man: the “seducer is a cad,” or against the event: “oh dear, this is the end of her life”) as being socially constructed, historically shaped, and often irrelevant to a particular situation or, more subtly, irrelevant to a discriminating readership. Self-satisfied members of Hardy’s audience, the text repeatedly suggests, might wake up to some honest doubt and faith, instead of relying on untested opinions and clichés.

The scene at Sandbourne, where Tess lives as Alec’s mistress in order to support her family, is another, if different, case in point. She is still a victim; she is still pure, even when she plays out the final scene of the patriarchal logic which has shaped her choices. Some readers blame Tess for killing Alec and some exonerate her. Hardy’s interest goes beyond individual right and wrong. The system which has entrapped her into such grotesque choices deserves the blame as much as any individual may. Any system which perpetually victimizes women and men, by forcing them to assume reductive parts in a repetitive age-old drama, should itself be drained of blood and breath.

Hardy’s treatment of his characters is also blatantly non-stereotypical. The character presented most stereotypically, Alec, assumes new identities as the book proceeds, to preacher, to industrial overseer, to victim. Moreover, his posing with a pitch-fork as Satan is notably self-conscious and even self-mocking. On another level entirely, that of narrative treatment of character itself, Tess is both person and figure. Distinguished from others by her red ribbon at the May Day processional, Tess immediately assumes a distinctiveness for the reader. Yet as the book proceeds, she becomes less and less individualized: turned into a “figure in a landscape,” she eventually disappears altogether, marked only as having once existed by the raising of a black flag. From a woman seen at close range – lips, eyes, dress – she becomes a type seen from afar in a field or on a horizon, herself now a mere metonymy of a person, represented by a grey serge cap, a red woolen scarf, buff-leather gloves.

Tess changes for the reader by shedding her historical and psychological identities (a past self leading to a future one), and by becoming, instead, parceled, metonymized, and finally a mere shape. The novel takes her from being a she, to a collection of aspects, to an it, and ultimately to a...
nothingness. Her personhood is restored for a brief moment, when she
snatches happiness with Angel in the abandoned house before moving on
to the sacrificial pillars of Stonehenge. But her recovered “fullness” is
short-lived and itself compromised by her own idealization of Angel.

Hardy prevents his readers from regarding character as a unifying force
or coherent reference point. He fractures his central characters through
multiple point of view and multiple genres. Just as Marlott itself may be
viewed from various locations and positions, so Tess is observed from
perspectives that are not only variegated but are also conflicting. Tess is
aristocratic by lineage, bourgeois by education, and a rural proletarian by
birth. She speaks bilingually: dialect and standard English. The narrator
deliberately makes her half-woman and half-girl. When we first meet her,
Tess’s face supposedly reflects different phases of her youth: “you could
sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks or her ninth sparkling from
her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and
then” (T, ii, p. 21). Later, her fluctuating moods alter a face that is
sometimes pink and flawless, yet pale and tragic at other times (xvi, p.
109). The narrator claims that she is forever severed from her childhood
innocence by her experience in the Chase, yet counters his assertion
whenever he continues to treat the adult Tess as a childlike innocent.

Though her suitors often perceive her monochromatically, Tess is never
one thing. When Angel can no longer see her as the equally worshipful
narrator does, he must stereotype her as soiled. Yet his earlier idealization
of Tess as a nature goddess, which she disowned, was just as reductive.
Despite the clarity his surname “Clare” evokes, Angel shows himself to be
as limited in perception as Alec, who first narrowly admires her as a juicy
morsel, a “crumby girl” (T, v, p. 46).

Unlike these two central suitors, the narrator does not waver in seeing
Tess doubly. For example, even after she becomes a mother and assumes a
more handsome womanliness, and even after her erotic attraction to Angel,
she does not lose her virginal qualities for the narrator. But if the narrator’s
dual perspective undercuts the single-mindedness of Alec and Angel, it is
not exempt from criticism. The presence of the implied author, known to
the reader by the sum of all the text’s points of view, reveals the narrator’s
point of view to be overly romantic and egocentric.

As Tess’s third suitor and a mixture of the other two, the narrator
combines Angel’s spirituality and Alec’s cynicism. Yet even though he
exhibits an erotic sensuousness that resembles Alec’s and often adopts the
over-intellectualized pedantic and circumlocutionary style of Angel, this
prime suitor is also mocked by an implied author who asks us to recognize
that the narrator is as eager as these two male characters are to possess a
femininity which remains unpossessed, dispossessed, unclaimed, and above all, unable to be possessed, because valued for the wrong reasons.

The Shakespearean epigraph Hardy affixes to the novel's title-page, "Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed / Shall lodge thee," appears to refer to the novelist or the narrator, who offers his own breast to harbor his dispossessed heroine. While this feeling is certainly heartfelt, and while Tess represents something true and vulnerable, the overt literariness of the expression of desire here illustrates both the power and the limitations of art.

Writing may lodge Tess, but cannot contain her, for she and her powers are greater than the narrator's or the novelist's hold. This is not to make her into an idealized essence, object of a mythologizing process she herself resists. Rather, she exists outside as well as inside subjective impressions of her and hence she must necessarily elude whatever containers male viewers and tellers devise for her. In this sense, the novel knowingly mocks the novel tradition, as well as its own particular enterprise of representation.

Tess resists being held and appropriated. Even the narrator cannot narrate her sexuality; it is inaccessible even to him. Henry James's comment about the novel, "The pretence of sexuality is only equalled by the absence of it" (LW, pp. 259-60), seems fully justified in more ways than one. We get only traces of Tess's full sexuality: a breath, the color of her lips, energy. Her full sexuality is unobtainable by the narrator who, deeply invested in the story, gives evidence of being as physically attracted to Tess as Alec is, but like Angel falls back on a rhetoric of idealization. Hardy has created a narrator who oscillates between the extremes represented by Alec and Angel. The narrator's oscillations, however, are not those of the implied author, Hardy, who ironizes the incompleteness of the positions of Alec and Angel but also undermines his narrator. Through his handling of Tess and her three suitors, Hardy challenges the foundations of realist character-drawing and perspective.

In addition to his complex treatment of plot and character, Hardy invokes multiple genres which do not easily co-exist, but whose premises call each other into question. He sets up a hall of mirrors effect, what Millgate calls a "multiplicity of lightly invoked frames and patterns" (Career as a Novelist, p. 269) by juxtaposing or intermixing elements of classical tragedy, stage melodrama, realist novel, ballad, polemic, and comedy. Moreover, philosophic ideas in the novel do not cohere, as the conflicting and unresolved accounts of nature offered so poignantly attest. Romantic ideologies, upholding nature's "holy plan," clash with a Darwinian notion of nature's randomness and cruelty. Yet both are questioned by a view of cosmic forces indifferent, not just to woman and man, but to all species.
These different accounts of nature bring with them a host of jarring allusions: pagan deities and Christian angels, fallen and unfallen. Yet the landscape itself is always physical, sometimes posited as existing apart from the human mind and sometimes energized only by the human mind through the pathetic fallacy. It is hard to believe, as some critics assert, that Hardy is so fundamentally confused about philosophy, literature, and strands of evolutionary theory that he mixes up such views because he doesn’t know better or even that Hardy’s allusions are only local, intensifying the effects of one scene or chapter. Rather, the very muddle, suggesting randomness, challenges the unitary and anthropocentric aspirations of so many of our cultural systems. If none of the frames and patterns, allusions, and philosophies captures Tess, any more than her suitors do, they do work to make her and her story always richly layered and refracting.

Nowhere does Hardy subvert conventions more effectively, and more outrageously, than on the level of intertextual reference and lexical use. His allusions to other narratives are wrenched from their contexts, fragmented, and recombined. These include references, for instance, to Romantic and Victorian poetry, classical drama, philosophical tradition, the Bible, educational tracts, *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, paintings, American poetry. The narrator’s intellectual glosses never cohere into a philosophy or even a logical argument and are often counterpointed or interrupted by his lyrical effusions, as sentiment and irony remain divorced.

Hardy’s handling of language reproduces the narrative strategies of the book as a whole. Hardy’s critics have repeatedly noted what seems his awkwardness with diction and syntax, his clumsiness and odd self-consciousness. He is notorious for an “awkwardness” which “challenges not just the decorums of a given genre but the decorums of the language.”6 As Taylor has shown convincingly, this poet-novelist and thinker very carefully studied the relationship of language past and present. Hardy views words as fossils – bearing traces of earlier ages and meanings. Rather than overvaluing them, however, he wants to brush off their dust and test them for their ability to guide or to tragically misdirect in the present.

*Tess* is even more concerned with representing, sometimes by gestures of language and sometimes through silence, that which altogether eludes meaning or interpretation either because unknowable or because impervious to knowing. In a text so profoundly concerned with names, spoken and written words, and meaning, language sometimes fails. The flag at the end of the text waves “silently” and the survivors are left “speechless.” But language does not fail because of narrative deficiency; it fails by narrative design.
Hardy’s subversion of language and use of silence, like his contortions of plot and intertextual mixing, help shatter the novel form as readers had previously known it in the nineteenth century. For Hardy resolutely refuses to placate his audience. The entire final chapter of *Tess* offends the average novel reader with its deliberately badly written prose. Hardy’s decision to pair Angel and Liza Lu as progenitors of the species is designed to outrage. Hardy mocks the second-rate conceptualizer Angel Clare by providing him with a mini-Tess. But he also mocks the idealizing aspects of Angel in himself. Hardy kills Tess in order to free her from constructions put on her by society and by individuals – not to further idealize her, but to remove her.

The novel’s ending is especially disturbing because Hardy deprives the reader of cathartic closure. Instead, his narrator aestheticizes Tess and those close to her. The ending of the novel troubles readers not only because Angel follows Tess’s directive to marry her sister, but also because the implied author denies us an outlet for the deep emotional involvement we feel. The last chapter offers no catharsis as it rewrites the end of *Paradise Lost*. The shrunken, pale faces of Angel and Liza Lu, covertly compared to Adam and Eve and overtly compared to angels in a Giotto painting, signal a shrunken humanity in a closure markedly different from Milton’s epic and from prior novels because of the heavy emphasis on aestheticization of the characters. In Milton’s epic, at least, Adam and Eve have fallen but depart “hand in hand” holding a “paradise within.” In *Tess*, the right Eve is dead, Adam joins hands with a lesser Eve, and there is no paradise within for these characters. Angel and Liza Lu appear as half-frozen, stylized artifacts, rather than living beings. They are unusual in comparison with other survivors of Victorian novels in that they are both more diminished in human terms and more elevated by analogy, but elevated into art rather than life. Hardy’s narrator aestheticizes these figures because he has never had full access to any of them; his mode has been to conceptualize, describe, and idealize.

The narrator’s diction also makes the ending particularly unsettling. As Taylor suggests, the phrase “President of the Immortals,” for instance, undermines the whole notion of deity and immortality. The artifice of the phrase “President of the Immortals” conjoins words and ideas that do not go together: a political term such as “President” of an Athenian Council with a traditional term for the gods, blessed ones, which in Hardy’s translation becomes “Immortals.” Moreover, the sentence self-consciously announces its own mixed status: “Justice” is in quotes; “in Aeschylean phrase” draws attention to the intertext, and, when justice is counterpoised to “sport” (*T*, lix, p. 384), Aeschylean tragedy is awkwardly blended with
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The paragraph that invokes the dead d’Urberville knights and dames and ends with a biblical and Miltonic reference to Angel and Liza Lu as Adam and Eve leaving Eden, hand in hand, conjoins pagan and Christian, political and religious, gaming and ethics, aristocratic and middle classes, Norman and Gothic architecture, and the speechless living and the muted dead. Such savage sporting with Tess and such a profusion of references at the close is an odd strategy for a male author who loves his heroine for her simple purity. Yet educating his readers by defamiliarization is the primary goal of a novelist who would have us treat women differently, alter linguistic conventions, and reform the institutions that misshape women as much as language.

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is not only the richest novel that Hardy ever wrote, it is also the culmination of a long series of Victorian texts which identify, enact, and condemn the alienated condition of modernity. The undermining of a reader’s expectations is already common in the Victorian novel form. Yet Hardy goes further with irony and surprise than even his favorite novelist, the equally subversive William Makepeace Thackeray. Doubleness, multiplicity, and irony are key aspects of a strain of Victorian aesthetics and artistic practice working at the limits of conservative doxa from the 1830s until the end of the century. It is through this intellectual formation that Hardy’s work can best be understood.

Strands of this intellectual formation would include William Johnson Fox’s reading of Jeremy Bentham in conjunction with his remarks on poetry in the *Monthly Repository*, Robert Browning’s poetic strategies and philosophy of art, John Ruskin’s theories of art and the social, especially his comments on the Gothic “grotesque,” and Thomas Carlyle’s pronounce- ments about his era’s self-consciousness and the alienated modern mind.7

It is useful to keep in mind the Victorian poetic tradition. Techniques upon which Hardy draws in all his work, including irony, dialogism, multiple perspective, imbalance, and fractured characters, flourished in that genre from the 1830s on. Hardy, who started and ended his literary career as a poet, would presumably have been well-read in prior and contemporary achievements. In particular, the Benthamite aesthetic of the 1830s, articulated by Fox, is germane as a context for Hardy’s literary practice.

Fox believed that texts should take up current issues and that they should analyze “modern” states of mind – projecting and exploring different associative processes as they are formed in different time schemes and environments. Fox would support Hardy’s sense of time as a layering of pasts and presents and he would support Hardy’s understanding of
character as constructed by socialized mental processes. To analyze "modern" states of mind, though, means more to Fox than "showing" consciousness or "telling" about it.

The aesthetic put forward by Fox features dramatic projection, dialogic representations, and a large role for the reader. Fox isolated drama as the central art-form because it explores conflict and relationships in complex ways that place demands on viewers and listeners. The dramatic element proved useful to poets, as well, who wished to get away from the purely subjective, made popular by Romantic lyrics. Poems like Browning's "Pippa Passes," referred to in Tess (xxxvii, p. 248), and the dramatic monologue show how mental events can be externalized and objectified through dramatic projection and presentation. This is what Fox urged.

As Isobel Armstrong has recently argued, Victorian double poems foreground two very different and contradictory readings at the same time, by offering frames of reference which comment on each other ("Introduction," Victorian Poetry). The gap between the frames of references produces ironic effect which causes the reader to question and probe motives and meanings of the lyric voice, while remaining enthralled by its power. The generic extension of this kind of poem was the long dramatic sequence or series, from Browning's The Ring and the Book to Christina Rossetti's Monna Innominata, itself a response to Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, to George Meredith's Modern Love, to Thomas Hardy's Poems of 1912-13 and The Dynasts. Thomas Hardy, I am arguing, takes into fiction this dialogic, ironic strategy of expression, critique, irony, self-consciousness, and reader responsibility. And he does so on every level of the narrative construct.

This radical aesthetic does not need to be tracked in Hardy's reading or even traced back to one or two thinkers, for it formed the fabric of an entire way of thinking through the conversation of Victorian intellectuals. In particular Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" (1829) and Sartor Resartus (1831) and Ruskin's account of the Gothic "grotesque" in The Stones of Venice (1851-53) influenced intellectuals in many disciplines. Years before Karl Marx produced his theories about the ill-effects of capital, both Carlyle and Ruskin perceived that they were part of a new historical situation which was altering the relations of society. Mechanization, especially, was changing the relationship of the laborer to her work, and was producing an effect of alienation, a divorce of experience and value.

The aesthetics of alienated consciousness is most directly addressed by Ruskin. He believed that enslaved and oppressed modern consciousness can only embody itself through distortion, not wholeness. The art which best enacts such distortion, in his view, is the grotesque, a form of the
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gothic imagination which Ruskin noted had been already embodied in the
dramatic monologues of Browning. Ruskin suggested that the art-forms of
his era attempted to be the form in which modern consciousness sees,
xperiences, and desires. Thus the text is not only unstable and fractured
but unable to be unified in conventional ways, and thus unable to be read
without hard labor. In this context, it is possible to see Hardy as a proto-
modernist in his last three novels especially.

Texts in this tradition were expected to participate in ideological critique
and transform the consciousness of readers. I would claim such effects for
Hardy's text, just as I would claim the general intellectual influence of this
tradition on him, whether indirect or direct. Texts in this tradition both
reproduce the myths through which the nineteenth century operated and
imagined itself (how it sees the past, how it views the fallen woman, how it
defines love, how it rationalizes industrialism) and critique them at the
same time. This is, I believe, the substance of Hardy's literary project not
only in *Tess* but in all his novels, to greater or lesser degrees. What has
often been dismissed as awkward, clumsy, or perverse in Hardy's work may
well be a rather accurate enacting of the Benthamite aesthetic and the
Ruskinian grotesque.

*Tess* enacts the confusions and divisions of modern consciousness, the
“ache of modernism” (*T*, xix, p. 129), by reproducing its illogic and its
divorce between experience and value. The novel assaults the reader with
materials both shocking and subversive. In offering no final explanations or
a satisfying resolution, Hardy defies narrative community by exploding
conventions which cement the bond between audience and teller to show
them as being unfit for the times. He shatters narrative form to make his
readers simultaneously love Tess and experience fragmentation. That
breakage, aesthetic, ideological, and social, would eventually issue forth a
different aesthetic for fiction. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, however, takes the
Victorian novel to its limits without turning it into a didactic diatribe, a
satiric parody, or a series of lyric moments. This is its achievement and its
power.

NOTES

1 Michael Millgate writes of multiplicity, but still finds unity rather than
fragmentation in Hardy's aesthetic effects. See *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a

2 On realism, see George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from
Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), and
Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, originally Methuen,
1980). I was not able to take advantage of Margaret R. Higonnet's reading of
Tess, as our essays went to press at the same time. However, for a reading similar to my own, with regard to issues of realism, see her “Introduction,” *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, ed. and notes by Tim Dolin (New York: Penguin, 1998).


5 Particularly useful comments in this discussion were made by Richard Nemesvari and Keith Wilson, both on 5 April 1996. It is Wilson’s comment that is quoted in the text. The listowner of the VICTORIA e-mail List is Patrick Leary (Indiana University). The archives of the List, which can be consulted for the entirety of the discussion, can be located at LISTSERV@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU. Richard Nemesvari, in personal correspondence, 6 April 1996, singled out Millgate and Gregor as representative voices in past critical debates concerning whether it is more correct to term Alec’s conduct toward Tess rape or seduction, or a combination of both.


FURTHER READING


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