



Alternative
HARDY

Edited *and* Introduced *by*
Lance St. John Butler

Contributors

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THOMAS HARDY AFTER FIFTY YEARS (editor)

THOMAS HARDY

SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE MEANING OF BEING
STUDYING THOMAS HARDY

For Alice

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Introduction

Lance St. John Butler

All great writers speak in new ways to different generations. Hardy does this, and additionally seems extraordinarily capable of keeping the loyalty of what might be called his traditional readership while at the same time impressing the various schools of criticism as they emerge. In recent years his poetry has revealed depths and dimensions at one time unsuspected. His novels have proved even more elusive, complex and challenging than was thought only a few years ago. Affinities have been suggested the interpretative power of which is surprising only in that it had been overlooked before. Equally, Hardy's own life continues to fascinate and to offer previously half-seen facets to fresh eyes.

Thus the new languages of criticism—semiotic, structuralist, postructuralist—the feminist revision of literary meaning, political and religious interpretations, a more adventurous style of biographical enquiry, all these have been applied to Hardy in the last ten years. Hillis Miller has a brilliant deconstruction of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in *Fiction and Repetition*, Patricia Ingham has produced her *Feminist Hardy*, Jagdish Dave has offered a convincing analogy between Hardy and oriental thought in *The Human Predicament in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* and Howard Jacobson has taken outrageous, hilarious and revealing liberties with the meaning of certain episodes in Hardy's life in *Peeping Tom*.

These, and other studies of a similar kind, have emerged since I collected the essays published as *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years* in 1977. Then, approaching the half-centenary of Hardy's death, Hardy studies were in a healthy state but since then they have developed as strongly as one could possibly have expected and it seems appropriate, now in the late eighties, to offer a showcase that brings together some of the more exciting examples of these insights.

Two things distinguish the contributions to this volume: they are written by those who have proved themselves to be at the forefront of new thinking about Hardy, whether in Britain, France or North America; and they share a disregard for conventional disciplinary boundaries.

These qualities are made apparent by even the briefest summary. Thus Jean Jacques Lecercle is a linguist and critic of philosophy, Christine Brooke-Rose is an experimental novelist, Michael Rabiger a film and television director and theorist. Patricia Ingham presents us with *Jude the Obscure* and the two versions of *The Well-Beloved* as a trilogy of the utmost significance for our understanding of Hardy at the end of his career as a novelist; Hillis Miller discovers a Hardy who uses the central literary trope most revealingly in some of the obscurer corners of his work; Jagdish Dave convincingly pursues his thesis that it is with Buddhist eyes that we can best understand the complex metaphysical and moral standpoint of Hardy the poet. For Annie Escuret Hardy becomes a revolutionary comparable with Turner while, on another plane altogether, Henri Quéré and Janie Sénéchal offer a model Greimasian analysis of a few crucial paragraphs that should help us to see, finally, how it is that Hardy constructs his patterns of narrative possibility. The freedom which I find so exciting in all this is perhaps best exemplified by Howard Jacobson's contribution in which a superb range of insights are achieved from apparently unpromising material.

Criticism, after all, has been liberated too, and there is some hope that it may be able to retain both its new-found freedom, which has given it a new status and prestige, and its commitment to human values.

This volume presents a series of contrasts offering a number of alternative Hardys. This is as it should be. As Annie Escuret demonstrates, Hardy is one of the prophets of the new world-view that holds that there are no definitive or originary things, there are only versions of things. This view is not, of course, new at all, as a glance at Sartre or the Buddhist tradition will demonstrate.

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Contents

<i>Notes on the Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
Lance St. John Butler	
1 The Violence of Style in <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> <i>Jean Jacques Lecercle</i>	1
2 Ill Wit and Sick Tragedy: <i>Jude the Obscure</i> <i>Christine Brooke-Rose</i>	26
3 Provisional Narratives: Hardy's Final Trilogy <i>Patricia Ingham</i>	49
4 She, to Him <i>Howard Jacobson</i>	74
5 Hardy's Fictional Process and his Emotional Life <i>Michael Rabiger</i>	88
6 Prosopopoeia in Hardy and Stevens <i>J. Hillis Miller</i>	110
7 Buddhist Tendencies in Hardy's Poetry <i>Jagdish Chandra Dave</i>	128
8 A Flame Unseen: The Mystery at the Heart of Hardy's Vision <i>Lance St. John Butler</i>	154
9 Hardy's Alternatives in <i>The Woodlanders</i> , Chapter 39 <i>Henri Quéré and Janie Sénéchal</i>	173
10 Thomas Hardy and J. M. W. Turner <i>Annie Escuret</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	226

1

The Violence of Style in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Jean Jacques Lecercle

There is a sense in which we must begin our reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* with the last paragraph. But not the obvious sense. For it is too trivially clear that the closing paragraphs of the novel provide material for a retrospective reading and give both meaning and direction (*sens* in French) to the story, so that the whole novel is pervaded with emotional tension towards its catastrophic ending. What strikes one in the last paragraph, however, is not so much the climactic event on which it is the commentary as the violence of Hardy's style. The physical violence of Tess's death (which is not described) is displaced not only to the symbolic black flag (and indeed the word 'hang' which is the meaningful centre of the description is only present in the last chapter concealed within the apparently innocuous clause 'till the horizon was lost in the radiance of the sun hanging above it'¹) but to the violence of the language. In spite of Hardy's notorious disclaimer in the *Life*², there is stylistic violence in the famous sentence 'the President of the Immortals . . . had ended his sport with Tess'. The allusion is to a Promethean song of revolt against tyranny and torture³; the definite description for Zeus, taken out of its original context, takes on sardonic overtones, and the metaphor of the hunt is one of inherent violence. What we have is an explosion of anger, irony giving way to sarcasm and rage, an instance of verbal violence, as if the pent-up energy of a narrator who so far had kept his distance has suddenly been liberated.

Neither the suddenness of this violence nor the narrator's previous distance should be overstressed, although the last paragraph does contrast with the subdued and symbolic rendering of the execution itself. But the retrospective reading of the novel which this ending, like all endings, provokes, will show the importance not only of violence in *Tess* — for although violence is not absent from most of Hardy's novels, the amount we find here

is rather overwhelming: a rape, a murder, an execution, etc. — but also of the connection between violence and language, both as a theme (I shall try to show that to a certain extent this is a novel about language) and as a practice — I shall try to show that the violence of style is Hardy's main object in *Tess*.

I

The omnipresence of violence in *Tess* is often interpreted as tragic. In fact, the allusions in the last paragraph seem to point towards this. The President of the Immortals is clearly a tragic God, passing sentence for a fault which he himself has engineered. This is why Tess, a tragic heroine, although she is responsible for her deeds, remains a pure woman. And if one objects to this by drawing attention to the rather disrespectful tone which turns Zeus into the chairman of a limited liability company, we can answer by pointing to that well-known passage in *The Return of the Native*:

The truth seems to be that a long line of disillusion centuries has permanently displaced the Hellenic idea of life, or whatever it may be called. What the Greeks only suspected we know well; what their Aeschylus imagined our nursery children feel.⁴

Even if tragedy proper is no longer possible, even if the tragic catastrophe has become a melodramatic *fait-divers*, even if the heroic sufferings of the aristocrat have been superseded by the banal love sorrows and *crime passionnel* of a peasant girl, the tragic rhythm and the tragic sense of violence are still with us. And it is, as we know, not really possible to reduce Tess to a mere servant girl, seduced and deserted. In fact, the interpretive devices we can use for Greek tragedies seem to apply quite aptly to Hardy's 'tragic novels'. *The Return of the Native*, for instance, has the formal structure of a tragedy according to Aristotle's categories — five of the six parts correspond to the five acts of a tragedy, and one is even entitled 'The Discovery'. In the case of *Tess* the origin of the story is to be found in the world of classical tragedy.⁵ One can argue that the ending has a truly cathartic effect, and Tess appears to be the *pharmakos* of the tale — she suffers the catastrophe, she undergoes a reversal on her wedding night, although the true experience of *anagnorisis* seems to be reserved for Angel. It appears,

therefore, that Hardy is using a tragic structure in both novels, even if less clearly so in *Tess*.

I would like to show, however, that this traditional interpretation is open to counter-arguments. The first is that the ending is not truly tragic. In the literal sense, of course, the novel does *not* end, since the final words are '(they) went on': the closure is also an opening. This is in no way impossible as the ending of a tragic text: once the crisis has been overcome, life goes on. Or, if we interpret this in the terms of the folk-tales with which *Tess* shares certain characteristics, 'they lived happily ever after'. After the vicissitudes of the quest, the end of the text is the beginning of an uneventful and therefore uninteresting life which the heroes fully deserve. In this case, however, the hero's princess having just been executed for murder, this uneventful life will have to be spent with another woman: we are leaving equilibrium and getting dangerously close to Freudian repetition. It is not only a question of making the best of things after the catastrophe, for the woman who replaces Tess by Angel's side is not only her sister but also, Hardy insists, her replica.⁶ Is this another instance of Hardy's irony, a Hegelian repetition of tragedy as, if not farce, at least petty-bourgeois bliss? I am not sure, for *Tess* is not only riddled with repetitions, but the novel as a whole is the repetition of an *Ur-text*. If the ending opens up the possibility of a compulsive repetition of the plot — of Angel neurotically repeating with Liza-Lu, should he find her wanting, the traumatic scene of his separation from Tess — it also stresses, more importantly, the fact that the text is part of a chain of texts, each rehearsing, with due change of emphasis, the preceding one. There is, of course, no sequel to *Tess*, but the novel is the end-product of a series of texts. It repeats — in the tragic mode — two comic pieces: a poem, 'the Ruined Maid', and a shorter story, *Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid*.⁷

In the poem, there is a straightforward inversion of judgment and expectations: the maid's ruin is obviously the cause of her success, and the innocent narrator is rebuked for hoping to attain the same elevated state ('"You ain't ruined!" said she'). In the story, we find a series of elements that are repeated, displaced or inverted in *Tess*: a socially powerful and wealthy man, whom the maid saves from suicide (instead of murdering him), and who unwittingly almost ruins her happiness; and a marriage followed by immediate separation (but this is due to the maid's rejection of

her husband). Woman as the victim of social pressure, the wrong man first, whose lingering presence poisons the atmosphere, an unconsummated marriage: Hardy's imagination plays with these themes, and his text repeats itself in the system of their displacement. The main displacement is an anti-Hegelian one: the light comedy of *quid pro quo* turns into potentially tragic violence, the romantic milkmaid's happy end into catastrophe. But what turns into tragedy is not so much the plot itself (which is ambivalent — material for either a comic or a tragic version) as the narrator's language. The tragedy is not in the repetition of elements of the story but in the narrator's rage. The maid's ruin is no longer taken light-heartedly, and yet it is the same ruin. Two things have changed, which both have something to do with style — the heroine's situation, her style of life (which includes her relation to her own language), and the narrator's attitude, his style. The tragic violence is a stylistic one.

The second counter-argument is that the heroine of *Tess* is not a good *pharmakos*. True, she is the victim or the agent of violence, but it is always *at the wrong moment*. This is where comedy is repeated as tragedy. The *quid pro quo*, the missed opportunity, the wrong occasion are well known devices or themes of comedy. In Hardy's 'tragic' repetition they are translated into chance and the blindness of fate. Yet this is no mere transposition into tragedy: something of the comic origin remains in the repeated element, which means that in *Tess* the potentially tragic event occurs in the wrong (ironic) context.⁸ Thus, if we compare *Tess* to the model of all tragedies, the story of Oedipus, several differences strike us. At the early stage in the story when Oedipus causes violence — by killing his father — Tess is the victim of violence: she is raped. When she in her turn becomes a murderess, it is not the direct consequence of a tragic error — as it is in the case of Oedipus, whose decision to leave Corinth turns out to be the wrong one — but rather a long term effect, more like a catastrophe than a direct result of *hamartia*. Tess wanders, like Oedipus, but her wanderings occur too early. Instead of following the catastrophe (when Oedipus flees to Colonus), most of her peregrinations, with the exception of the final flight to Stonehenge, occur well before it. There is one event, however, which seems to occur at the right moment: a journey away from home, at the beginning of the tale, a chance meeting on the road (Oedipus kills his father at a crossroads) and the death of a creature named Prince, followed by self-accusations

and a sense of guilt, which are patently ominous ('Her face was dry and pale, as though she regarded herself as a murderess.'⁹). Only it is not her father she kills, but the family horse — an ironic displacement again. More generally, Tess is not a good *pharmakos* because she is a victimiser as well as a victim — much more so than a classic *pharmakos*. We are tempted to reverse the usual description and show that Tess destroys Alec's life (even before she murders him, she is the — albeit innocent — cause of his religious relapse) and brings pain and sorrow to Angel — she it is who forces him into emigration, with the subsequent illness and suffering. This deliberately biased summary of Tess's actions is meant to show that she is not only the object, but also the subject of violence.

It could be argued, perhaps, that my second counter-argument is unconvincing, that it shows, on the part of Hardy, not so much ignorance or rejection of the rules of tragedy as a deliberate flaunting of them: what is known in pragmatics as the 'exploitation' of rules. Displacing all the tragic elements, ironically inverting them, is a way of recognising their force. But I think that much more than this is at stake. For the violence caused by or inflicted on the *pharmakos* is determined and limited by the tragic structure. It takes place in the tragic structure of events at certain moments only; the *pharmakos*'s own violence is often relegated to a mythical past, and the tragedy concentrates on his or her violent expulsion. Not so, as we have seen, in *Tess*: there violence becomes reversible, as if the contagious violence of the world of René Girard's sacrificial crisis could never end.¹⁰ Only there is no sacrificial crisis in *Tess* but a whirl of violence, in which everybody is caught. This, again, seems to point to language — what I am describing is a situation of possession. Tess is caught in violence as the native speaker is possessed by his or her language, with no possibility of escape. Tess's prison-house is not only the violence of a male-dominated society, of the clash between social classes in a changing Wessex, it is also the prison-house of language, which inflicts violence on the subject, and is an insidious source of violent actions.

The first two counter-arguments point to language in a rather indirect fashion. The third is more directly concerned with it. For tragedy, too, assigns an important place to certain uses of language: the ambiguity of omens and prophecies, the inscription of his fate in the hero's name (*oidos pous* 'swollen foot'; *oida* 'I know'), the verbal battle of *stichomythia*, the dramatic irony and delusion of the angry speech. The first items are present in *Tess*, but the last is

missing: there is no linguistic *hubris*, no expression of the tragic hero's blind anger, as in Oedipus's famous speech (or, closer to us, in the exhortations of Sir Leicester Dedlock in *Bleak House*, when Inspector Bucket pays the part of Tiresias). Not that the novel is lacking in instances of dramatic irony ('What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is'¹¹), but they are disseminated all through the text, they are too numerous and too insistent to be mere elements of the tragic structure. This I take to mean that language in *Tess* is too central to be only the tool of tragedy: it is rather the content, or the reality, of the tragedy of Tess. I will try to show that the contradiction which lies at the bottom of the novel is that between two languages and two cultures, between Tess's dialect and the dominant language in her world, the Queen's English. Of course, there could still be a tragic interpretation of this: the novel as tragedy is an imaginary solution to this contradiction, exactly as Levi-Strauss interprets the myth of Oedipus¹² as a solution to the contradiction between two conceptions of the origins of man. But again, *Tess* will not be limited by the structure of tragedy: the novel refuses to resolve the contradiction between two experiences of language; on the contrary it unfolds it, develops it to the full, pursues it to its bitter end. Tragic violence is temporary and announces equilibrium: not so the violence of language in *Tess*.

In the last paragraphs, I seem to have eaten my cake and yet attempted to have it. I have tried to show that violence in *Tess* is not mere tragic violence, and yet I have also shown that the novel has practically all the elements of a tragedy. This contradiction is only apparent: it is accounted for by the textual work Hardy does on classical tragedy, a system of displacements not unlike those of the Freudian dreamwork. The outcome is the disappearance of the tragic structure in the dissemination of its elements (this is where we must take the passage from *The Return of the Native* mentioned above at face value: tragedy is no longer possible). Having discarded its structural limits, violence contaminates everything, because of its links with language. The young woman is no scapegoat, but rather the embodiment, both as subject and object, of this violence. My counter-interpretation is that what she embodies is the violence of language.

Although the rest of this chapter will be an attempt to substantiate this thesis, that is, to account for the violence/woman/language nexus, a provisional definition of the phrase 'the violence of