Ways of Looking at Tess

by Janet Freeman

"Londoners will drink it at their breakfasts to-morrow, won't they?" she asked. "Strange people that we have never seen."

"Yes—I suppose they will. Though not as we send it. When its strength has been lowered, so that it may not get up into their heads."

THOMAS Hardy had settled in London before he sent his first novel to its first professional reader. It was not very well received. By the time Tess of the d'Urbervilles was being looked at and rejected—twenty years later—Hardy must have been accustomed to trouble. His difficulties with its publication have been well documented; surely they lend a certain point to Angel Clare's reply to Tess on the night the two of them took Dairyman Crick's milk to meet the London train. Hardy himself knew enough about susceptible London heads.

Tess goes on thoughtfully to wonder about those Londoners, who, as she believes, "don't know anything of us . . . or think how we drove two miles across the moor to-night in the rain that it might reach 'em in time" (XXX, 158). She never comes closer to imagining the readers for whom, and in spite of whom, Hardy tells her story. She never realizes that she is being watched. But watching Tess is the most fundamental and uncompromising demand Hardy makes on those who read about her: none of his revisions alter that necessity. The way one looks—or fails to look—at Tess is an obsessive issue throughout the novel, as I hope to show; it touches one character

1 Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, ed. Scott B. Elledge (New York, 1965), Chapter XXX, pp. 157-8. I will cite chapter and page from this edition throughout.

2 He may not have foreseen, however, that he would be revising the novel on and off for the next twenty-three years. See J. T. Laird, The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" (Oxford, 1975). Michael Millgate, in Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist (New York, 1971), p. 24, comments that Hardy "seems never to have been entirely capable of judging the impact of his work upon its readers." That it had an impact is not in doubt.

311

© 1982 The University of North Carolina Press
0039-3738/82/030311-23$01.30/0
after another. The reader of Tess of the d’Urbervilles, however, as he or she joins with Hardy in watching Tess move from place to place and phase to phase is implicated with equal severity. This essay will attempt to describe how, though Hardy may have watered down the novel in deference to sensibilities more timid than his own, he nonetheless requires his reader as he does himself to participate in an experience attended implacably by both intensity and risk.  

The light is very poor at the little railway station where Tess and Angel bring the milk—one feeble, smoky lamp, shining dimly through the rain. Tess herself is nearly invisible until the train pulls in. Then, one must look sharp:  

The light of the engine flashed for a second upon Tess Durbeyfield’s figure, motionless under the great holly tree. No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl, with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause, the print gown of no date or fashion, and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow. (XXX, 157)  

That swift, portentous glimpse of girl and machine is given to no one inside the novel. It belongs only to Hardy and his reader, whose eyes take in the flash of light as if—when it strikes the defenseless Tess—it were a blow. The full force and significance of that visibility, though one experiences it again and again in the novel, emerge very gradually; but finally, when Tess is gone for good, they must be faced. For visibility in Tess of the d’Urbervilles is more than an instance—even a supreme instance—of Hardy’s well-known capacity to show rather than tell,4 to hold firmly to “the visible and tangible world,”5 to report from a safe distance on his “seeing,”6 to conceive his fictions like a filmmaker, in “visual terms,”7 or to give his reader “something scrupulously watched in its otherness.”8 Hardy has imagined heroines  

3 I borrow the word “participate” from U. C. Knoepflmacher, who, in Laughter and Despair (Berkeley, 1971), argues for the participatory quality of Victorian fiction. For a discussion of authorial personality as participating in fiction, see Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Teller in the Tale (Seattle, 1976).  


5 Joseph Warren Beach, The Technique of Thomas Hardy (Chicago, 1922), p. 144.  

6 J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Cambridge, 1970), p. 43.  


other than Tess who were beautiful to the eye. But Tess Durbeyfield’s visible beauty is the shape of her destiny: from having once been seen, all the rest will strictly follow.

The whim of Parson Tringham—who has never seen Tess, and never will—leads him to single out plain Jack Durbeyfield the haggler and call him “Sir John.” With this incident the novel begins. They never meet again. Durbeyfield goes to his grave unnoticed by the world, and the episode is closed—except for its value as an ironic, preliminary version of the carefully intent singling out of Durbeyfield’s daughter Tess. She lives in the “beautiful vale of . . . Blackmoor,” a spot only four hours from London, yet unknown to ordinary tourists. It is best approached by the traveller from the coast, “plodding northward . . . over calcareous downs and cornlands” until he suddenly reaches the verge of its surrounding hills and can see ahead, “extended like a map,” a world whose “smaller and more delicate scale” comes as a surprise and delight to behold (II, 9). This precious, secluded spot is the place of Tess Durbeyfield’s birth and her “unfolding” life. To her, it is “the world, and its inhabitants the races thereof.” To her, “every contour of the surrounding hills is as personal . . . as that of her relatives’ faces” (V, 29–30). Both “fertile and sheltered” (II, 9)—like Tess herself—it is the intimate landscape of her young, feminine mind and experience. Seeing its delicacy as clearly as possible is a way of looking closely at Tess, and is the real motive for the arduous indirect journey.

Only the reader is invited to make it, to earn that intimacy. It must be earned again when Tess at last appears. She is walking in the midst of a group of “genuine country girls, unaccustomed to many eyes,” who are made collectively uncomfortable by the “crude exposure to public scrutiny” (II, 11) their walking together has elicited. Singling her out is accomplished in spite of that self-conscious reluctance—the first time, but by no means the last, that Tess’s own preferences are set aside. She blushes with shame and embarrassment to see her father, drunk and singing about his ancestors, riding home in a chaise that belongs to the local pub, a blush that marks her at once as one of Hardy’s “admired women,” whom he habitually bathes in shades of red and pink.9 This “slow heat” (II, 12) rising over her cheeks, her face, and her neck is watched without scruple or pause; it brings her into focus, very near:

Ways of Looking at Tess

Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would fit over the curves of her mouth now and then.

Yet few knew, and still fewer considered this. A small minority, mainly strangers, would look long at her in casually passing by, and grow momentarily fascinated by her freshness, and wonder if they would ever see her again: but to almost everybody she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more. (II, 12)

Already, even before Angel Clare fails to observe Tess clearly enough, dances with someone else, and departs, Hardy is busy making distinctions among ways of looking at the girl with the red ribbon and the rising blood. In a moment, Angel walks away, "dismissing the subject from his mind" (II, 14); but Hardy remains constant—he watches as Tess slowly gets over her disappointment, and then, for the first time, he enters her mind, as if to demonstrate his own intention: singled out, Tess is to be looked at as no one has ever looked at her before. She is to become the object of a contemplation no one else in the novel—no matter how charmed by her appearance—comes close to reaching. This privilege Hardy shares with his reader but disallows anyone else.

Never before has Hardy exercised the power of looking closely at female beauty so fully, approaching his object so carefully, step by step. Bathsheba Everdene, in contrast, bursts upon Gabriel's astonished eye, the object more of his seeing than of Hardy's own. Elizabeth Jane Newsom is hardly noticeable ("our poor only heroine," Hardy calls her), as she humbly walks to Casterbridge by her mother's side, seen by nobody and doing all the looking herself. Eustacia Vye is first seen as a muffled human form, far in the distance, barely recognizable as female. Only on Tess does Hardy move in so deliberately, getting there without a slip.

Failures to see Tess rightly are everywhere in the novel, however, for the opportunity to look at her is offered again and again, to one pair of eyes after another, as if it were a test, a measure of value. Angel's two brothers, for example, are both short-sighted, though they wear the latest fashion in spectacles (XXV, 134). Blindly, they pass right by Tess, on the day she walked fifteen miles to Emminster Vicarage to ask for help from her father-in-law. To them, she is in-

10 The Mayor of Casterbridge (New York, 1977), ch. XLIII, p. 236.
visible. The Emminster congregation had at least looked at her, as it poured out of the churchyard after the Sunday service;\(^{11}\) Felix and Cuthbert ignore her presence altogether. Overhearing their supercilious conversation about Angel’s “ill-considered marriage” (XLIV, 249), Tess gives up and returns to Flintcomb-Ash. “No crisis, apparently, had supervened,” Hardy observes (XLIV, 251), yet he calls Tess’s decision to leave “the greatest misfortune of her life” (XLIV, 250). If so, it was surely because of that failure to see her properly. But more is to come: Tess sadly unveils her face as she heads back to Farmer Groby’s featureless fields. “Nobody loves it; nobody sees it,” she says; “who cares about the looks of a castaway like me!” (XLIV, 251). By that unveiling, however, she makes her self only too visible—for the instantaneous and shocked recognition of Alec d’Urberville, who happens to be preaching nearby. Thus is her fate decided: on whether and how she is seen. Alec d’Urberville finds that the mere sight of her is “electric,” a terrible threat to his new piety (XLV, 254); Angel Clare found that he had been loving another woman in her “shape” (XXXV, 192); his brothers look the other way. None of them sees her as she is.

That distinction is reserved for Hardy himself. Repeatedly recording the varieties of blindness and indifference surrounding her,\(^{12}\) Hardy’s own eye remains trained on “beautiful Tess,” following her history with singleminded concentration. This occupation is at once his discipline and his virtue—the form his existence takes inside the novel. As it is Tess’s destiny to be seen, so it is Hardy’s destiny to see: he does so unwaveringly, better than anyone else, his presence as observer continually felt. For instance, while the farm women watch Tess suckle her new-born baby during their noon rest (another example of the casual observer, just passively looking), one of them remarks, “Twas a thousand pities that it should happen to she, of all others.” Hardy is swift to add his own, much more attentive response:

\(^{11}\) Hardy seldom fails to notice the most incidental observation of Tess. They “looked at her as only a congregation of small country-towners walking at its leisure can look at a woman out of the common whom it perceives to be a stranger” (XLIV, 248–9).

\(^{12}\) Examples of the world’s indifference to Tess saturate the novel, from the solitary heron who looks at her silently when she first arrives at the Valley of the Great Dairies (XVI, 89) to the people who move into her parents’ cottage and think nothing of its former occupants (LIV, 308). Even the blindness of Alec’s mother plays a part in her fate. Had she seen Tess’s beauty, she might have intervened. Dale Kramer, in Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy (Detroit, 1975), describes Tess of the d’Urbervilles as a study of the subjectivity of experience and judgment (p. 112) and “the impossibility of objective and detached observation of life” (p. 113).
Ways of Looking at Tess

It was a thousand pities, indeed; it was impossible for even an enemy to feel otherwise on looking at Tess as she sat there, with her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor gray nor violet; rather all these shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises—shade beyond shade—tint beyond tint—around pupils that had no bottom . . . (XIV, 76)

Much later both Alec and Angel comment in far less specific terms on that mouth and those eyes,13 Hardy, however, saw them first. He looked at them most closely.

The loss of Tess’s innocence is another occasion for this near attention, for it takes place in the dark. The deed itself in fact is an act of sightlessness. Angel, walking away from the May-Day dance, had seen Tess only as a “white shape” (II, 14); Alec, stumbling blindly on her in the night, his hands outstretched, cannot see her at all. She too is blind, having fallen asleep:

The obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike. D’Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears. (XI, 62)

Alec cannot see those tears; they are there for Hardy to show his reader—privileged even in darkness to see Tess clearly, to know her weeping. Like the blush that comes over her when she senses Angel’s rapt observation at milking-time, only a “close eye” (XXIV, 127)—not Angel’s—can take it in. Hardy’s vision, unlike Alec’s, unlike Angel’s, never fails. Its constancy holds the novel together in a continuing act of attentive apprehension, performed with such care and feeling that it comes to suggest a hidden yet unchanging principle: the ability to see Tess rightly is the only imaginable good in the tragic world of Tess of the d’Urbervilles, and the single image of that good is Hardy himself.14 His intent, unswerving observation of Tess as her history

13 Alec tells her, “I was firm as a man could be till I saw those eyes and that mouth again” (XLVI, 468). Angel plumbs “the deepness of the every-varying pupils” (XXVII, 143), as he helps Tess with the skimming.

14 One of the earliest reviews of Tess of the d’Urbervilles feelingly expresses this sense of Hardy’s virtue: “The end is significant. Tess’s unworthy husband and her sister march away from the black flag into a land of promise. She is left dead in the depths of shame, with none to remain with her but her chronicler—whose chief title to honour it
unfolds is as broad as it is narrow. Various associations crowd around the Tess of Hardy’s vision, and he welcomes them all. She is linked of course to the Norman d’Urbervilles, in appearance as well as behavior; she is linked to pagan tradition, both in her club-walking (a “local cerealia,” as Hardy puts it) and in her time as a dairymaid; later, she is linked to both Eve and Mary Magdalen. More than that, she is representative throughout the novel of what Hardy saw as doomed rural England. All these contexts lend significance to the girl whose tear-strewn eyelashes Hardy notes so closely, but to see her—the real Tess—rightly is, when all is said and done, to see those tears.

Hardy’s watching presence, steadily felt, is the most fundamental stability in the novel. The spectacle itself—the thing seen—consists on the other hand of a world in which nothing stays the same. Obscured by mist—as when Tess and Angel walk around Talbothays at dawn (XX, 111; XXXI, 164), by fog—as when Tess and Alec wander in the chase on the fatal night (XI, 59), by snow—as when Tess and Marian labor on the fields of Flintcomb-Ash (XLIII, 241), even the landscape is unstable, a “psychological phenomenon” (XII, 72) that habitually expresses the changing experience of its inhabitants, the changing lights of day and night, and the changing seasons of the changing year. Over and over the merciless sun is noticed as it rises and sets, casting “fantastic mysteries of light and shade” (L, 288) on the turning world beneath it, and bringing Tess’s future inexorably to pass.

Hardy’s eye is fixed on this inconstant, moving landscape as if to oppose—even arrest—that motion. His consciousness of Tess herself is similarly antagonistic: each of the shifting phases of her identity Hardy registers with resistance and dismay. “A fieldwoman is a portion of the field,” he explains to his urban reader; “she has somehow lost her own

will henceforth be that he was the advocate of Tess.” From The Bookman, February, 1892, as quoted in Thomas Hardy and His Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews, ed. Lawrence Lerner and John Holmstrom (New York, 1968), p. 74.


16 So says Irving Howe, in Thomas Hardy (New York, 1967). He sees Hardy’s presence in the novel to be as important as Tess’s own. “Through his musing voice, he makes his presence steadily felt. He hovers and watches over Tess, like a stricken father” (p. 131). That Hardy’s attitude is fatherly, of course, is open to question.
margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it” (XIV, 74). But later, when Tess threatens to disappear in just this way as she journeys to Flintcomb-Ash (where the fields themselves are “faceless”), Hardy firmly disallows any such thing. One remembers Fanny Robin’s long march to Casterbridge, imagined seventeen years before this one. Fanny doesn’t think about her looks; but Tess has cut off her eyebrows and covered her head with a handkerchief so that no one will look at her any more. Hardy replies to that wish with his own unfaltering gaze, using the present tense in order to bring her even more vividly before the reader’s eye, and giving her work clothes a microscopic examination:

Thus, Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the landscape; a fieldwoman pure and simple in winter guise; a grey serge cape, a red woollen cravat, a stuff skirt covered with a whitey-brown rough wrapper, and buff-leather gloves. Every thread of that old attire has become faded and thin under the stroke of raindrops, the burn of sunbeams, and the stress of winds. There is no sign of young passion in her now—

The maiden’s mouth is cold
Fold over simple fold
Binding her head.

Inside this exterior, over which the eye might have roved as over a thing scarcely perciptent, almost inorganic, there was the record of a pulsing life which had learnt too well, for its years, of the dust and ashes of things, of the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love. (XLII, 233–4)

Once again, Hardy has achieved an intimacy in opposition to Tess’s own preference. His will to look clearly and closely, to bring the blurred object of his looking into focus, is relentless. He never forgets Tess’s identity as an individual, suffering consciousness throughout her slow transformation from maiden to murderess, even in the face of her habitual lapses into passivity, reverie, and dream,17 and her repeated impulse to disappear, to remain unseen.18

17 “Do what you like with me, Mother!” she says, before setting out for Trantridge (VII, 40), and Joan gets to work. The death of Prince occurs because she slept. The loss of her innocence occurs as she sleeps. Her marriage to Angel takes place as if in a dream. And when she tells him of the murder of Alec, she “murmurs in a reverie” (XVII, 319).

18 For example, when visibly pregnant, “her sole idea seemed to be to shun mankind” (XII, 72); when on her way to Talbothays, the new scenery “where there were no invidious eyes upon her” sends up her spirits (XVI, 87); and at the end, her happiness with Angel is found in an empty house far from the eyes of the world.
For a time, Tess takes part in this struggle herself. Wishing to stay the same, to be perceived as unchanging, singular, and "pure," she strives—in the beginning—for the very integrity Hardy's attention to her image insists on. Each, in effect, endorses the other. It is well to notice this identity of motive, if only to notice more vividly its absence in the end. Tess, like Hardy, is fully aware of the existence of individual consciousness—others as well as her own. It is she, for example, who wonders about the strange Londoners, drinking Talbothays milk; it is she whose "mind's eye" imagines the sleeping villagers as she passes through Nettlebury on her way home to her sick mother (L, 286), who thinks sadly that her brothers and sisters will get along in her absence "with no great diminution of pleasure in their consciousness" (XVI, 85). Furthermore, she believes that both Alec and Angel possess fixed, not changeable, identities: she refuses—rightly—to credit Alec's religious "transformation," and she refuses even to notice the lingering signs of Angel's Brazilian fever. His mother could scarcely recognize him, but "to her he was, as of old, all that was perfection, personally and mentally" (LVII, 319). In short, Tess, in kinship with Hardy, is an advocate of the stable, identifiable human individual.

The midnight baptism of her infant, Sorrow, is Tess's most fervent expression of this conviction. By identifying him—giving him a name—she will save him from hell. But she identifies her own self with similar seriousness, when more than once she tells Angel, who tends to confuse her with "a visionary essence of woman," to "call me Tess" (XX, 111), and when she refuses to allow that she herself may not be unique. "What's the use," she says to him,

"of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'." (XIX, 107)

She argued the same point to the vicar, after the baby's death: "Don't for God's sake speak as saint to sinner, but as you yourself to me myself—poor me!" (XIV, 82) And, much later, when his rapture has evaporated, to Angel: "I thought . . . that you loved me—me, my very self!" (XXXV, 192)

In the end, this form of defense will fail her: "The woman I have
been loving is not you," Angel says in horror (XXXV, 192), and departs. That denial of Tess's very existence is the most serious crime committed in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and it is committed by a man whose awareness of and respect for Tess as a particular consciousness has been carefully observed and made to seem complete. Angel's experience at the dairy teaches him to perceive uniqueness among the members of Farmer Crick's household, to abandon the notion of a 'typical and unvarying Hodge' (XVIII, 100). He seems aware of the value of Tess's individuality as "a woman living her precious life—a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself" (XXV, 130). And he loves Tess, or so he thinks, "for herself . . . her soul, her heart, her substance" (XXVI, 139). This sensitivity makes Angel the perfect mate,"the right and desired one in all respects" (V, 35). Nonetheless he commits that crime.

Tess recovered from the Trantridge episode (when she was "doomed to be seen and coveted" [V, 35] by Alec) by means of her natural exuberance; but Angel's punishment—he refuses to look at her at all—is more than her sense of her self can sustain. That this is the issue is made plain in the desperate letter she finally writes him:

I am the same woman, Angel, as you fell in love with; yes, the very same!—not the one you disliked but never saw. What was the past to me as soon as I met you? It was a dead thing altogether. I became another woman, filled full of new life from you. How could I be the early one? Why do you not see this? (XLVII, 279, my italics)

Tess's struggle to be looked at rightly, however, is almost over. Alec d'Urberville's attack on her grasp of her own identity comes next. It takes a more direct and perhaps more decisive form; unlike Angel, who stays away, Alec pursues her without pause. His pursuit consists largely of sneaking up on her when she isn't looking and watching her unobserved,19 a peculiarly suitable sort of violence against one whom to see is to covet. "There never were such eyes, surely, before Christianity or since!" he exclaims, "don't look at me so—I cannot stand your looks!" (XLVI, 263). Or again: "I cannot get rid of your image, try how I may!" (XLVI, 265). And again: "I could not resist

19 For example, as she works in the family garden and looks up to find him (L, 289), as she gazes out the window on the night before the Lady-Day move (LI, 293), and as she looks about the d'Urberville tombs at Kingsbere (LII, 302).
you as soon as I met you again!" (XLIV, 268). He confesses it eagerly—the fact that her visible presence exerts a force neither he nor she can control. This presence, its old power to attract undiminished, Tess at last repudiates. Having come to believe that "in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which nature had endowed her she was some-how doing wrong" (XLV, 257), she ceases to recognize her body as her own—a response seen clearly by Angel, well after it has been accomplished (LV, 314)—and lets Alec do what he will.

Batthsheba Everdene, who herself falls in love at first sight—a mistake Tess never makes—learns to value the steady regard of Gabriel Oak, her beauty comfortably domesticated. Eustacia Vye (whose hair ribbon is black, not red) dies of the incongruity between her wish "to be a splendid woman," preferably living in Paris where she could be looked at, and her fate at the edge of Egdon Heath as the wife of the weak-eyed Clym Yeobright—her beauty, as it turned out, not powerful enough. Sue Bridehead’s fragile beauty is nothing in itself except as it expresses the conflicts of her inner life; and Arabella’s appearance as "a complete and substantial female animal" exists in simple opposition to that complexity. But Tess’s physical appearance is supremely powerful. It shapes her destiny. And so there is a certain logic to this response, this repudiation, and she carries it out to the end.

Long before, Alec’s eyes had "riveted themselves" on what Hardy nicely calls Tess’s "luxuriance of aspect." It worried her, this "fullness of growth," until her friends told her it was "a fault which time would cure" (V, 34–5). But the fault in Tess’s appearance that turns eyes into rivets does not disappear. It continues day after day, every time the light of the sun’s sentient, personal, and masculine eye (XIV, 73) seeks her out and makes her visible. Tess has often wished to

20 With Sergeant Troy, under the fir trees, "brilliant in brass and scarlet." Far From the Madding Crowd (New York, 1957), ch. XXIV, p. 142. "His sudden appearance," says Hardy, "was to darkness what the sound of a trumpet is to silence."


22 Jude the Obscure (New York, 1978), Part First: "At Marygreen," ch. VI, p. 34. Jude is fully aware of their contrasting appearances—for instance, when he regards "the small, tight, apple-like convexities of [Sue’s] bodice," he sees them as "so different from Arabella’s amplitudes" (Part Third: "At Melchester," ch. IX, p. 150).

23 See J. Hillis Miller, "Fiction and Repetition: Tess of the d’Urbervilles," Forms of Modern British Fiction, ed. Allan Warren Friedman (Austin, Texas, 1975), pp. 54–5, for a discussion of the sexual implications of the action of the sun in this novel. Tony Tanner gives the sun a more cosmic significance; see n. 8, above.
remain unseen, as if to be looked at at all were a form of violation—but she has wished it without success. Her self-repudiation is in answer to this fate.

The murder of Alec d’Urberville is the expression of Tess’s violated and denied identity. By means of it, however, she masters her destiny: she succeeds in turning away. Taking the bewildered Angel with her, she willingly leaves the world. Their short happiness—like the life of the infant Sorrow—lasts only a few days. It takes place in a deserted mansion “whose shuttered windows, like sightless eyeballs, exclude the possibility of watchers” (LVII, 321). Only in secret can this union come to pass, for Tess must not be seen. Again the sun betrays her: “a stream of morning light through the shutter-chink fell upon the faces of the pair, wrapped in profound slumber” (LVIII, 323) and the old caretaker who peeps in at them turns in the alarm.

It is fitting that Tess—knowing the source as well as the curse of her visibility—lay herself on an altar devoted to sun-worship, and that the sun’s ray peer under her eyelids (LVIII, 328) at the moment the county constabulary has found her out, has laid eyes on her. “I am ready,” she tells them, as if all the implications of their looking for her were utterly clear. And indeed what was once implicitly true of Tess’s visibility is now explicit: it is fatal for her to be seen, and to be seen is to be taken, possessed. She was right, long ago at the club-walking, to be uncomfortable under scrutiny. Now, as she stands up, shakes herself, and moves forward, her knowledge of this reality is complete.

Tess is not visible again, a deprivation that this time Hardy is helpless to prevent. The sun shines over Wintonester on the day of her execution with absolute clarity, its light empty of pity, making the buildings of that city appear “as in an isometric drawing”—that is, without perspective (LIX, 329). The obscuring mists and fogs have been burned away. Hardy’s restless eye, which he can no longer fix on Tess, registers this flatness and then looks into the distance toward the horizon, “lost in the radiance of the sun hanging above it” (LIX, 329). Drawn to the prison, the tower, and the tall staff on its cornice, it there remains. The eyes of Angel and ’Liza-Lu are “riveted” to the same object.

Neither Angel nor ’Liza-Lu nor Hardy nor anyone else in the novel witnesses Tess’s execution. She has turned her back on them all. Instead, they are collectively reduced to watching a personified black
flag move slowly up the staff and extend itself in the breeze—surely an image not of Tess's guilt, but of their own. Thus Hardy at last—and his reader with him—joins the others, his power to see indistingu- guishable from theirs. If that power is the image of good in the world of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, it is of a good that fails, that—denied its object—dies away.

For without Tess to look at, Hardy's one skill is useless. All his purity and privilege evaporate. His presence in the novel, after all, his identity as the only perfectly attentive eye, depends on having Tess to observe: she is the instrument that calculates for him his own peculiar value. And to what greater, more significant, use could any- one be put? Losing Tess brings Hardy's need for her out in the open and makes plain the fact that his own way of looking—for all its close attention—is yet another form of possession. Having made his jour- ney to Blackmoor Vale, he went ahead and singled her out, like Par- son Tringham, turning Jack Durbeyfield into "Sir John." He dis- missed the fact of her rural obscurity, invested her with interest, and turned her therefore into the sign of his own sensitivity and merit. The title page of the novel, one may remember, called Tess "a Pure Woman Faithfully Presented by Thomas Hardy." He judged her, judged her to be pure, and handed her over to the reader. He had made her his own.

And so the habit of watching, of looking on, which is pervasive throughout Hardy's fiction, is in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* brought to the test. That habit imposes on Hardy, willy-nilly, a spectatorial, subject-object stance. By using the act of looking as the metaphorical equivalent of all forms of apprehension, Hardy encloses himself in an image that turns the subject of his apprehension into an object—the object his eye can see. By necessity, then, Hardy himself is implicated in the very immorality he has watched and deplored. He cannot es- cape this fellowship. The grief that overwhelms the end of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, fixing the novel in its readers' memories as much today as it did in 1891, is the expression of this guilt, futility, and loss.

*Denison University*

24 In 1892, for instance, William Watson wrote that "*Tess* must take its place among the great tragedies, to have read which is to have permanently enlarged the boundaries of one's intellectual and emotional experience." *Academy*, XLI (February, 1892), 125.