Language and Disguise: The Imagery of Nature and Sex in Tess

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“Do you think I meant country matters?” (Hamlet III.2)

As recently as 1966 David Lodge felt constrained to defend Hardy against charges that his writing was “slack and inattentive.” Lodge spoke of the perception of Hardy as one who “figures in literary criticism and literary history as a great novelist ‘in spite of’ gross defects” (164). To be sure, readers are still disposed to find glaring defects in Hardy’s novels. But the reservations pertain largely to structural considerations, or to ones of narrative perspective. With Lodge, few of us today would begrudge Hardy his due as stylist. Language that may appear awkward or clumsy or less than stylistically smooth usually, after all, works to exceeding good effect. He is, it seems to me, finally not an “in spite of” novelist so much as he is—especially with respect to language—a “much more than” one. That is, as with most great novelists, the language contains considerably more than meets the eye. In fact, one of the wonders of Tess of the d’Urbervilles is the way that language masks meaning, the way that the imagery, until the clue is taken, disguises its own argument. If no one in the novel understands Tess and Tess’s sexuality with anything approaching correctness or, more importantly, respect, the reader at least is invited to read deeper, to read beyond the (acceptable) surface level of appearance. The reader is invited to scry the signs.

My scrying is upon Hardy’s technique of embedding sexual symbolism within his nature imagery. To be sure, as England’s if not the world’s most famous nature novel, it has hardly—or so it would seem—had a stone or leaf left unturned in it. Moreover, especially as feminist criticism of Tess has emerged in the last ten or so years, Hardy’s treatment of sex and sexuality has been in the foreground of a number of perceptive studies. And yet, though several of the episodes and passages that I will be considering figure importantly in
others' discussions of Tess, they do not figure within a firm context or consideration of sexual imagery. In a novel so powerfully informed by its main characters’ sexuality and by the attitudes of the other characters, as well as by the novelist himself, toward this sexuality—in a novel so rife with natural details, one might expect imagery that reinforces this central theme. Almost every critic has noticed how the novel’s nature imagery serves to describe or define Tess. I wish to develop the way that Hardy takes his nature imagery at least one vitally important step further, to render the naturalness of Tess’s sexual being through nature details. Hardy disguised his symbolism partly because he had to—we recall Sgt. Troy’s interesting and meaningful bit of sword display in Far from the Madding Crowd—given the exigencies imposed by the censor. But the peculiar sort of ambiguity that Hardy quite deliberately (in both senses of the word) constructs suggests that he was interested in much more. No novelist before Hardy uses language so instrumentally to establish the animal human being. Angel is not so much wrong to think of Tess as a pagan goddess as he is wrong to abstract the goddess from her earthly element. Not that Angel is against sex—far from it. But by idealizing Tess’s sexuality, by esteeming—and estimating—it in proportion to Tess’s “purity” as he perceives it, he destroys his myth in the very act of creating it. On the other hand, by using imagery that centers Tess in her quite earthly sexual being, Hardy both demythologizes (in Angel’s terms) and mythologizes her (in his own). The more the imagery, particularly the sexual imagery, establishes Tess’s superbly realized humanness, the more she grows beyond the all-too-humanness of the other characters. As this imagery develops, expands as it were, it becomes one of the chief undergirding and informing structures of the novel, one by which we can chart Tess Durbeyfield’s development along the mythic lines Hardy has designed for her.

I said that critics have largely ignored the sexual implications of Hardy’s language. To be sure, everyone is aware of the difficulties Hardy had with the publication of Tess. And everyone who treats the character Tess is obliged, to some extent, to treat the sexual creature that she is. Surely, also, everyone recognizes that to take sex out of a Hardy novel—and of no Hardy novel is this more true than Tess—is often to remove its very mainspring. It is, as he says in Tess, the human “appetite for joy” (244). It may be that since the sexual conformations are in places woven so plain, figured so hugely, we do not think to feel for the fitness of the texture. Where the sense seems so apparent, especially when reinforced by Hardy’s editorial nudges,
we may not consider that there might be undermeanings, or we may look for them in different places.

Hardy's strategy, then, is to render Tess's purity (the novel is, after all, a study of a "Pure Woman") through imagery that, conventionally, is wholly inimical to purity. Or we might see it as a tactic in a larger strategy to establish Tess's holiness in terms that, conventionally again, are almost wholly inimical to the "spiritual," the "religious"—in terms, that is, of the amoral and often terrible natural world: to be momentarily anachronistic, a more nearly Lawrencian than a Wordsworthian nature. I would like to proceed first with Hardy's treatment of nature—or of the interpenetration of Tess and nature—and then work downward and inward to the imagery that both disguises and creates Hardy's design.

I

In no other Hardy novel is nature imagery so profuse and so integral to meaning as in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. At the source of the imagery, of course, is Hardy's "natural supernaturalism," supernatural certainly only in the sense of deity-as-myth; the structure of the novel, itself generated out of this natural religion, also generates the imagery. Hardy uses the basic Christian myth of the Garden and Fall as the ironic metaphor for the "pagan" ethic that Tess, unthinking (Angel is the thinker), embodies and that society thwarts. To be sure, Hardy is aware of possible problems of his espousing: through Angel, however, at least the Angel prior to his initiation in the crucible of South America, Hardy is able to expose the shallow and naive literary variety of paganism that stands in stark contrast to the internalized paganism of his pure heroine "faithfully presented." We should make of faithfully what it offers: resonance with the holiness of Tess's affections. Hardy's faith is writ large here in the action of the novel, which is that of Paradise Lost and Regained: regained to the extent that anything is ever gained in Hardy's fiction. It may seem to be speaking too dramatically to say that Nature was Hardy's religion. For one thing, few novels with a nature "ethic" portray Nature to be so frequently harsh, or hostile even, as Tess does. For another, Nature-as-god smacks of Wordsworthian piety, which Hardy is pleased to satirize on two occasions in the novel. Nonetheless, Nature does provide Hardy's most admirable characters with what solace and comfort they do find.

Tess, after all, is Hardy's unblemished and divinely human Eve. Again and again the imagery identifies her with Nature. She has
“holmberry lips” (64), as Alec describes them. (In English folklore the holm, or holly, most brilliant at Christmas, was a life symbol.) When Alec, the first time, seeks to kiss her on these holly-berry lips, the eyes with which Tess regards him are those of “a wild animal” (64). From the start, then, Hardy wants us to associate Tess-Eve with both the plant and animal worlds. Later in the novel, when Tess and Angel cart the milk from Talbothays to be loaded on the train, Hardy gives us this passage:

Then there was the hissing of a train, which drew up almost silently upon the wet rails, and the milk was rapidly swung can by can into the truck. The light of the engine flashed for a second upon Tess Durleyfield’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. . . . (239)

The contrast here between the train, which comes out of the frightening world of people and commerce, and Tess is a striking one, made even more so by our recollection of a previous image. When Tess returns from Trantridge, where Alec has deflowered her, Hardy tells us that she “had learnt that the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing” (96). The way the imagery of the later passage picks up that of the first typifies Hardy’s method throughout the novel. We can especially admire the skill in the “drew up almost silently,” as Alec—the Satan—he himself drew up silently (at least so far as Tess is aware) upon her as she slept in the Chase. The fact that Alec represents the social world, the world of man, and is also the serpent is perfectly consonant with Tess’s experience and with the polar oppositions the novel establishes, a polarity deftly epitomized in the juxtaposition of the “great holly” tree and the hissing locomotive.

The deflowering itself had been adroitly set up by the scene in which Tess first visits the Trantridge “relations.” In the garden at Trantridge Alec bedecks the dreamy Tess with flowers in such a way that, when she returns to Blackmoor Vale, one of the passengers on the van laughs and says, “Why, you be quite a posy! And such roses in early June!” (50). Since Tess, who never sins against Nature, never loses her innocence, she is again and again described through the imagery of plants and flowers appropriate to one who, in Farmer Crick’s words, is a “fresh and virginal daughter of Nature” (155). In
the scene at the end when the caretaking neighbor looks in at Tess and Angel through the bedroom door in the house in the New Forest, she sees “the pair, wrapped in profound slumber, Tess's lips being parted like a half-opened flower near his cheek” (499). The repetition of these images provides a texture whose absence would considerably diminish the story. The images engage themselves in the action. For instance, Hardy's description of Tess as a kind of wild animal (a large cat, or leopard) affects or colors our reading of her killing of Alec. It is the elemental, wild-animal aspect of Nature acting through Tess at this moment. But if this is one side of Nature, it is only one side, though it is finally as innocent as the other, the gentle side, which is represented in Tess as a bird—the second and at last more significant animal image that attaches to her.

We have seen that the serpent hisses where the bird sings. When Angel later plays his harp, Tess watches “like a fascinated bird” (158), a curious and subtle inversion of the previous image. Time and again we see Tess in association with birds, “walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges” (108), walking on a “thyme-scented, bird-hatching morning” from home to the Vale of the Great Dairies. Her employment at Trantridge was to tend Alec's mother's chickens and bullfinches, the latter of which she learned to communicate with by whistling. At Flintcombe Ash we see Tess “like a bird caught in a clap-net” (370) and hear her later telling Angel that she feared she would kill Alec because of the “trap he set” for her (491). The intricacy of the imagery is especially evident in the forest scene of Tess's defloration, deft in the way that this scene anticipates a later one. For instance, when Alec gets lost and ties the mare to a tree, we are told that he made a “sort of couch or nest for [Tess] in the deep mass of dead leaves” (88). The juxtaposition of “couch” (with its implications) and “nest” and “dead leaves” (with their symbolic possibilities) is itself striking. Of the philosophical comment that follows, implicating “duty,” suffice it to say that not only God, and Tess's guardian angel, but also the “gentle roosting birds” in the boughs of the primeval yews and oaks are sleeping just as Tess is, though to be sure a “coarse pattern” is shortly to be traced upon “this beautiful feminine tissue” (90-91). The fact that the birds sleep while Tess is violated might suggest that the identification between them and Tess is an incomplete one; but this is not so. The remarkable scene that Hardy sets up with this one shows us the perfect aptness of the identification.

In this scene, Angel has departed for South America following the revelations of the wedding night, and Tess, after several wearying and
disheartening jobs, has decided to join Marian at Flintcombe Ash. On the way she receives what she thinks are advances from the man who had insulted her at the inn (and who will be her employer at Flintcombe Ash). She flees and, as it is night, makes her bed out of what unpromising materials she can find:

Under foot the leaves were dry, and the foliage of some holly bushes which grew among the deciduous trees was dense enough to keep off draughts. She scraped together the dead leaves till she had formed them into a large heap, making a sort of nest in the middle. Into this Tess crept. (353)

We note the holly bushes, and also the presence of the same details as in the previous scene, with the appropriate absence of a couch. Tess, thinking of her situation, thinking “All is vanity,” cannot sleep. She hears then some sounds in the leaves: “Soon she was certain that the noises came from wild creatures of some kind, the more so when, originating in the boughs overhead, they were followed by the fall of a heavy body upon the ground” (353). The birds, of course, are the pheasants hunters had shot. When morning comes, she sees them lying on the leaves, “their rich plumage dabbled with blood.” Some are dead. Those alive are “all of them writhing in agony, except the fortunate ones whose tortures had ended during the night by the inability of nature to bear more” (354). Tess breaks the necks of all those she can find to end their tortures.

So much is right about the details here. The sleeping birds of the earlier scene are now birds dying horribly. We see that they are, in one sense, Tess; in another, we see Tess’s humanity, though we should perhaps wish to have a better term at hand given the circumstances: “Poor darlings—to suppose myself the most miserable being on earth in the sight o’ such misery as yours! . . . And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me” (355). But of course, metaphorically speaking, Tess does bleed, a fact that makes her gesture and her words that much more poignant.

This scene says effectively that Tess is equal to Nature. We can see how her killing the birds is wishfully, symbolically self-murder. But the statement about “the fortunate ones” whose tortures had ended during the night by “the inability of nature to bear more” makes the point directly. The birds are Nature. Now the claim that Tess is Nature has to be qualified, to be sure. Tess is also human. But we
have seen what is human in the story. Tess might have been frightened by the sounds in the leaves "Had she been ensconced here under other and more pleasant conditions . . . ; but, outside humanity, she had at present no fear" (353). Strategically, then, it serves Hardy that we see Tess not only as having associations with Nature, which is what most critics claim for her, but as being indistinguishable from Nature insofar as he can make her. The claim that Tess's "fall" leads to heightened consciousness is understandable in the light that she speaks more and more in Hardy's own voice, so far as we can know it. But if we examine the novel we will see that she has always spoken with Hardy's voice, even before her fall—except that she does not "fall"—as this exchange between Tess and her brother shows:

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"
"Yes."
"All like ours?"
"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like apples on our stubbard-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted."
"Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?"
"A blighted one." (33-34)

If anything, the accident and the death of Prince scarcely more than minutes after this conversation asserts Hardy's version of the doctrine of original sin. Paradise has always been blighted (the "blighted" apples), and Prince's blood upon Tess is the signature of her own blight: blighted apples, blighted humanity. Hence, later, the "blights" in the scene in the Talbothays garden. Blightedness is the condition of Nature and humanity; but of course blightedness (even in Hardy) is not all—as the existence of Tess proves.

So far as Tess's "development" goes, what she learns is mostly what she already knows. Angel possibly develops as a result of his experiences, but Tess changes little from the instinctual, animal-aware self she had been when we first see her. What we chiefly become aware of, besides the "animal presence" within which she lives, is the extent to which sleep or dream-like states organize the parts of the action in which she is concerned. Tess does not "awaken" because, within the sleep-conscious animal world in which she has her being, she is already awakened: her sense of a fallen world precedes her "fall." It is true that she brings a somewhat different consciousness to Talbothays than she brought to Trantridge and to Flintcombe Ash than she
brought to Talbothays. But the differences are to be reckoned mainly by degrees, not kinds. And if, at Talbothays, her "passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest" (160), when she is on her own after the disaster of her wedding night her ways progressively take on, we are told, "the habitude of the wild animal" as she tries to avoid society (351). The unconscious sun is her element. The sun at Talbothays seems to work upon her as it does upon the vegetation. "Rays from the sunrise drew forth the buds and stretched them into long stalks, lifted up sap in noiseless streams, opened petals, and sucked out scents in invisible jets and breathings" (165). When Angel returns from Enminster, he surprises her as she stands in the door of the house: it is Tess of the sun, and the cat-Tess, that he addresses.

Tess's excitable heart beat against his by way of reply; and there they stood upon the red-brick floor of the entry, the sun slanting in by the window upon his back, as he held her tightly to his breast; upon her inclining face, upon the blue veins of her temple, upon her naked arm, and her neck, and into the depths of her hair. Having been lying down in her clothes she was warm as a sunned cat. At first she would not look straight up at him, but her eyes soon lifted, and . . . regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam. (218)

In other words, she looks at him carnally; but also, this is Tess's second sexual awakening. The "sunned cat" brings together in one Eve two of the novel's principal images. At the end of the novel Tess returns to the sun, one might say. At Stonehenge (where she is captured as the sun rises), she asks Angel, "Did they sacrifice to God here?" . . . 'No,' said he. 'Who to?' 'I believe to the sun'" (503). We may recall at this point the early passage about the "old-time heliolo-tries": "One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky" (109). To be sure, the sun (with Nature more generally) is not always kind. But Nature's other side is Tess, her "virginal daughter," whose unconscious drift, when she is not being coerced by "social law," is with "the 'appetite for joy' which pervades all creation" (244). It will pay us in the next section to look at this passage closely because in it, I believe, is the clue that enables us to see an extraordinary development in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, one contained solely and purely in the language that says what the action does not or cannot.
II

Hardy, both in what his life denied him and in what his imagination afforded in compensation, betrayed a keen appreciation for the sexual instinct. Even if we knew nothing of the ardor he felt (but did not, so far as we know, act or succeed in acting upon) for women other than his wives, his writings contain ample illustrations of healthy sexual appetites (often frustrated). Tess, of course, is no exception. Each of the three principals, including Angel, has at least his rightful portion of sexual urges. Accident, or “hap,” however, as is frequent if not inevitable in Hardy, is the frustrator of the happy realization of these urges: “why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order” (91). At any rate, Alec’s sin is in the taking, Angel’s in the not taking. Angel, however, is keen enough to act upon his sexual urges at Talbothays, as his importunings of Tess to marry attest. Both are driven by the “appetite for joy” which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed” (244). Fairly obviously this appetite for joy is the overwhelming sexual instinct of everything in Nature. Hardy’s euphemism is well chosen, since both nouns express also, beyond their generalized and literal meanings, this feeling for the sexual act with which the novel fairly seethes. Hardy is quite insistent to represent the altogether natural presence of the sexual urge or instinct. Earlier he had described the unrestful sleeping of Izz, Retty, and Marian and commented: “The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called sex” (187). As is not infrequent, then, he contrasts the naturalness of their desires, or perhaps just the absolute unavoidable fact of them, with the “social law” as he elsewhere calls it:

The full recognition of the futility of their infatuation, from a social point of view; its purposeless beginning; its self-bounded outlook; its lack of everything to justify its existence in the age of civilization (while lacking nothing in the eye of Nature); the one fact that it did exist, ecstasizing them to a killing joy; all this imparted to them a resignation, a dignity, which a practical and sordid expectation of marrying him would have destroyed. (187-88)
The later comment about creation's "appetite for joy" will resonate strongly with the "killing joy" here, enriching, deepening the tone of the narrative. Here is an early expression of it (Tess is visiting Trantridge and eating the lunch that Alec has brought to her):

He watched her pretty and unconscious munching through the skeins of smoke that pervaded the tent, and Tess Durbeyfield did not divine, as she innocently looked down at the roses in her bosom, that there behind the blue narcotic haze was potentially the "tragic mischief" of her drama—one who stood fair to be the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life. She had an attribute that amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fulness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. (47-48)

We can admire what this passage accomplishes. Alec-Satan is sizing Tess-Eve up. We note that he is smoking, a clever detail suggesting more than one thing: that is, it not only reinforces the Satanic identification; it also suggests Alec's lust. As Eve, Tess is "unconscious" and "innocent": she does not "divine"—a wonderfully ironic punning—that Alec is to be her sexual undoer (the "blood-red ray"). Most interesting, though, is the "attribute" in Tess that Hardy speaks of which causes Alec's eyes "to rivet themselves upon her" (my italics). As Nature (and Satan's desire was to overthrow God's creation), Tess had "a luxuriance of aspect, a fulness of growth," in sum, a sexual radiance that Alec must bring under his will. Hardy's chief concern in the passage is to embody in Tess the sexual aspect of Nature. Understanding Hardy's larger strategy enables us to understand what he is working, through the imagery, in the garden passage at Talbothays.

In this passage, we remember, Angel is playing upon his harp and Tess, beneath, listens like a "fascinated bird" as the notes sound with "a stark quality like that of nudity." The passage is absolutely central to Hardy's meaning (and appropriately comes almost dead-center in the novel):

The outskirt of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of
pollen at a touch; and with tall blooming weeds emitting offensive smells—weeds whose red and yellow and purple hues formed a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers. She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him.

Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star, came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and the dampness of the garden the weeping of the garden's sensibility. Though near nightfall, the rank-smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound. (158)

The images conduce to an aggregate meaning: Hardy is rendering the scene and describing Nature in terms of sexual intercourse. Angel is above, Tess is below. Connecting the two is the music that Angel produces from his instrument, the notes of which are identified with pollen. The sounds pass into Tess, "like breezes through her, bringing tears to her eyes." Tess, as Nature, is the garden, at home in it, instinct with it, like the stealthy cat. The garden's—Tess's—"weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness" (my italics). The connection, or communion, between the two is described synesthetically: "the waves of colour [the flowers] mixed with the waves of sound" (158).

What about the rankness, the odors, the numerous "offensive" images? These do, after all, pertain to the garden, the feminine complement in the sexual equation. Since Tess is fully woman, fully Nature, then Hardy may wish to give the reader the full and natural experience, including the smells, of the female sex and the act it naturally subscribes to. The key sentence, it seems to me, is this one that lifts the description above the purely physical: "The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and the dampness of the
garden the weeping of the garden's sensibilities.” If we can take this sentence as I am suggesting we do, then Tess's physical sensations are translated into a spiritual dimension. The weeping is joy and pain, both, appropriate to the experience at its most physically and spiritually intense.

But if we are looking for further physical corroboration of this reading, I would suggest these details. The reference to Angel's playing as being only mediocre has generally been interpreted as a symbolic detail pertaining to Angel's moral inferiority to Tess. Certainly this meaning is there. But the “second-hand harp” seems a bit off-center as a reinforcing detail. If we look at it, however, within the context of a sexual reading, then its presence makes perfect sense. We remember that Angel has had one previous affair, with the woman in London. Hardy, it appears, has provided us with a quite cunning biographical reference to the previous use of Angel's instrument. For the sake of balance, Hardy should complement this masculine biographical reference with a feminine one. And he does. Actually this one precedes the other. Hardy says of the “outskirt of the garden in which Tess found herself” that it “had been left uncultivated for some years”—it has been three years since Tess's initial and last sexual experience—“and was now damp and rank with juicy grass.” Thus Hardy has worked into the description details that are external but that operate internally to further intensify the symbolic sexual action that is taking place.

Hardy is describing “country matters” in both the literal and embedded senses of Hamlet’s remark to Ophelia. What appears to be unpleasant in the passage, or “offensive,” is after all essential—and finally is not unlovely: just as Tess, the lowly milkmaid, is not unlovely (far from it), and just as she becomes the highest expression of Nature, of life, because she does not deny the essentials that in fact constitute her. Angel will at last come to understand these country matters (though for now he is “above” them). In this respect the scene may have a proleptic purpose. But Hardy’s intention primarily is to redefine purity, to desensitize sensibilities to what has been considered impure, which is also another way of saying that he wants to sensitize insensibilities (specifically Angel’s, more generally ours) to what is pure. Ironically, the most effective way for him to do this is to deflate ideal notions of purity. Thus the “rank,” the “offensive.” The passage says precisely what it is Tess's singular virtue, as it had been Eve's, to know from the primal first: “Everything that lives is Holy.” Though the line is Blake's, the effort of Hardy here is Nietzschian: the transvaluation of values, expressed through the concrete images
of the garden. But as Tess has had “to draw up to the performer, keeping behind the hedge that he might not guess her presence” (and her meaning, yet), so does Hardy have to draw up in disguise so that the gentle (that is, genteel) reader might not guess his meaning, yet. The passage is brilliant in all phases of its execution.

It is curious to note how genteel, and how unguessing, we have been as readers. Has Hardy been too brilliant for his own good, if we do not comprehend the sexual drift of the language? In a novel so suffused with large sexual implications, why have we waded, so to speak, into the water but resisted the current? To be sure, it may be simply that I am wrong. But given the wide divergence of critical opinion on this passage and the lack of consensus about its meaning—and given also the way that this passage picks up, clarifies, advances other passages and developments in Tess—this is the reading that has the richest implications within Hardy’s design. Though the main line of Hardy criticism has largely ignored the sexual undermeanings of the passage, A. Alvarez, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of Tess, has detected their presence: “The intense eroticism of the writing—more erotic, I think, than the full frontal attacks we are used to today—is not in the people but the details of the scene.” After noting a few of these details, he writes: “It is as though the vegetation itself contained all the secret smells and juices of the act of physical passion” (17). But he is the only critic that I know of to confront the work in this way. Other readings, though often persuasive in the larger terms of the argument being advanced, fall short, I think, in not addressing what is most essential in the passage, and in Hardy. I would agree with Lodge that Hardy has given us “conflicting linguistic clues” (179). These disguise, I believe, a devilishly clever pig’s puzzle thrown in the face of his Victorian audience; but more importantly, they also suggest, once the concealed meanings are taken, a wonderfully enriching enlargement of one of the book’s main themes.

This passage in Tess of the d’Urbervilles is central, but it does not stand alone. It is anticipated and followed by others that are so written as to invite a sexual reading, written, that is, both to prepare for and to amplify upon others. This earlier one, for instance, when Tess reaches the Froom valley, helps to explain what Hardy means by “rankness”: profusion, fecundity. “It was two hours, owing to sundry wrong turnings, ere she found herself on a summit commanding the long-sought-for vale, the Valley of the Great Dairies, the valley in which milk and butter grew to rankness, and were produced more profusely, if less delicately, than at her home—the verdant plain so
well watered by the river Var or Froom" (132-33). But as if to underline the suggestions here, Hardy provides still another description of the same valley — Angel's view after arriving from his visit with his father:

An up-hill and down-dale ride of twenty-odd miles through a garish mid-day atmosphere brought him in the afternoon to a detached knoll a mile or two west of Talbothays, whence he again looked into that green trough of sappiness and humidity, the valley of the Var or Froom. Immediately he began to descend from the up-land to the fat alluvial soil below, the atmosphere grew heavier; the languid perfume of the summer fruits, the mists, the hay, the flowers, formed therein a vast pool of odour which at this hour seemed to make the animals, the very bees and butterflies, drowsy. (216)

This description, with its "summer fruits," "mists," and "pool of odour," would appear almost a gloss upon the garden one. Hardy has proved himself well enough acquainted with the uses of phallic imagery (I have noted a previous instance of its use outside Tess) to be aware of what a man standing on a prominence looking into a "trough of sappiness and humidity" might stand for. As Tess is Nature, then the expectation would be a green trough, or valley, certainly during the seasons when "Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Froom Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate." For then the "ready bosoms existing there were impregnated by their surroundings" (190).

Still another instance of Hardy's use of sensual language that we must read, I believe, as having deep sexual import occurs when Tess and Angel are engaged in making cheese. Farmer Crick has sensed something taking place between the two and so leaves them by themselves:

They were breaking up the masses of curd before putting them into the vats. The operation resembled the act of crumbling bread on a large scale; and amid the immaculate whiteness of the curds Tess Durbeyfield's hands showed themselves of the pinkness of the rose. Angel, who was filling the vats with his handfuls, suddenly ceased,
and laid his hands flat upon hers. Her sleeves were rolled far above the elbow, and bending lower he kissed the inside vein of her soft arm.

Although the early September weather was sultry, her arm, from her dabbling in the curds, was as cold and damp to his mouth as a new-gathered mushroom, and tasted of the whey. But she was such a sheaf of susceptibilities that her pulse was accelerated by the touch, her blood driven to her finger ends, and the cool arms flushed hot. (226-27)

It is difficult to think of novelistic passages so rife with not-quite yet all-but-stated sexuality. In the immaculate whiteness of the curds against Tess's hands, which are of "the pinkness of the rose," in Angel's filling the vats with the substance, the idea is clear. The built-up passion contained in the act, then, of his kissing the inside of Tess's arm with its taste of mushroom and whey, the description of her as a "sheaf of susceptibilities" is masterly in its evocation of the suffusive fulness of the sensual, the appetitive, in Nature. The imagery of each scene catches up the imagery of preceding scenes. Here the mushroom and whey odors, together with the milky curds, call up the imagery of "rank" vegetation in the earlier garden scene. Tess's being a "sheaf of susceptibilities" recalls her in the garden and the fields at Talbothays and in the rites honoring Ceres at the beginning. At the same time it suggests the inseparability of her instinctual, natural self from her moral and emotional self. Earlier, the "appetite for joy" was described as a force that "sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed," a description that calls up Tess in the garden, among the weeds, "undulating" upon the "waves" of the music Angel produces on his harp. The imagery, I am saying, not only creates its own meanings and reinforces those of the novel's actions; it also links the individual scenes, many, or most, of which require interpenetration with earlier scenes for their effectiveness.

Just as, in any other novel, the following passage might be completely self-contained or nonreferential, here we can see it has tremendous implications because of the signals that Hardy's language elsewhere throws off. Tess is returning on the "van" from Trantridge after her first visit, thinking she has removed the flowers with which Alec has bedecked her: "Then she fell to reflecting again, and in looking downward a thorn of the rose remaining in her breast accidentally pricked her chin." And Hardy significantly goes on: "Like all the cottagers in Blackmoor Vale, Tess was steeped in fancies and pre-
figurative superstitions; she thought this an ill omen—the first she had noticed that day" (50). Hardy gets tasked frequently for his omenizing, but here he needs the omen to ensure his meaning. For Alec is to deflower Tess, to draw her virginal blood as the rose thorn does here. In his time, pricked had precisely the same slang significations for Hardy as it has for us in ours.9 Once again, he has artfully asserted and disguised his meaning at the same time. And the passage not only foretells the seduction; it also, quite cunningly, will serve in pronounced counterpoint to the imagery of Hardy's conclusion. The imagery, then, overall in the novel, creates a coherence, or unity, built on a dependence of part to part. But to understand Hardy's achievement in total, we must look at one more relationship.

III

Hardy, having been trained as an architect, not surprisingly put a great premium upon a novel's "form," or structure. Consequently, the novelists he admired were generally those whose works evidence clear principles of form. He admired, for instance, Walter Scott, whose The Bride of Lammermore he declared to be "almost perfect [in] form" (Personal Writings 121). He praised Anatole France for his "organic form and symmetry" (Later Years 159). As an architect, Hardy knew also how to conceal, that is, how to integrate structural features so that they provided their supporting function at the same time that they were out of sight: not that as a novelist he always managed this feat so well. He did largely succeed in Tess, whose form, I believe, derives chiefly from interior shaping processes along the lines J. Hillis Miller has suggested, though I think we can say that Hardy would have been aware of them since the imagery that informs these processes, though no doubt some of it came magically unannounced as in nearly all great creations, had to have been mainly, as I have tried to show, deliberated.

We can think of the visible structure of Tess according to four main panels, each portraying its heroine at a different emotional and moral stage, and each of these printed upon a different scenic, and symbolic, background. I have said that Tess does not change in essentials though these essentials do develop. She progressively becomes more kind, and more hard. The two qualities come together in her killing of the wounded birds, an action requiring both. The panels at any rate, identified by their locations, are these: the Vale of Blackmoor, or Little Dairies, including Trantridge; the Valley of the Great Dairies, and Talbothays; Flintcombe Ash, including "Sandbourne"; and the
New Forest, including Stonehenge.

The first is a green, secluded, and sleepy valley, drawn to a small pattern. A forgetful mist hangs over it. Trantridge is located next to the Chase, which Hardy significantly describes as “a truly venerable tract of forest land, one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primeval date” (42). (It is here, of course, that Tess-Eve loses her virginity.) There is no mention of any water—lakes, streams, and so on. The second panel, the Valley of the Great Dairies, or Froom or Var Vale, depicts a second Eden, also secluded, also sleepy (though the quality of its sleepiness differs). We picture it as Tess, who is destined to lose this Paradise as well, first sees it: “It was intrinsically different from the Vale of Little Dairies... The world was drawn to a larger pattern here” (133). It is drawn to a larger pattern because, symbolically, more is to be lost. At Trantridge Tess lost merely her virginity, or sexual innocence. Here her loss is figured in larger moral terms. The betrayal is spiritual as well as emotional. The chief difference, other than scale, is that here there is a river, the Var or Froom, as well as streams and lakes and pools. This difference enhances the pastoral quality of Talbothays, further distinguishes its identity from the world “out there”—the world of theAlecs that Tess fears. Here is safety, or so it would seem. In *Map of Arcadia*, Walter R. Davis writes that “The pastoral action consists... of disintegration in the turbulent outer circle, education in the pastoral circle, and rebirth at the sacred center” (38). Tess is not quite at the “sacred center” yet, but in the Valley of the Froom she is moving steadily closer. For here is water also.

The third panel depicts the “turbulent outer circle.” In terms of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* it is, of course, Hell. Tess-Eve’s fall throws her into a world whose denizens kill for sport the innocent creatures of Nature. Its human representatives are the farmer (Groby) of Flintcombe Ash and, once again, Alec. And Flintcombe Ash and being Alec’s “wife” are each Hell. The landscape features are precisely the opposite of those of the two Edens. Verdancy is replaced by stone, water (at Talbothays) by aridity and frozen rain, variety by “joyless monotony” (400). It is the landscape of the damned-on-earth, cruel and ungiving. But Paradise cannot be regained unless it is lost. Flintcombe Ash objectifies this loss.

The fourth panel satisfies Hardy’s structural plan for the novel while at the same time remaining true to our sense of its “spirit.” For in a Hardyan universe, Paradise cannot be *held*. And so the false Eden of the Vale of Blackmoor, embracing the longest period of time (seventeen years), gives over to the ur-Eden of the Valley of the Great
Dairies (months), which after the necessary interval of Hell, or turbulence in the outer world, is succeeded by Paradise, as near to the mythical condition as one can achieve in the world projected by the novel. Depicted on this fourth panel is Tess and Angel's retreat "into the depths of the New Forest" (495). If Alec's deflowering of Tess takes place in the primeval forest, with all the forest's sexual connotations, it is appropriate that the delayed consummation of Tess and Angel's marriage take place in the New Forest. Hardy may well have chosen the site for its name. This Tess is the New Eve, or New Woman.

As Tess's education has taken place in the two pastoral circles through the worldly Alec and the neopagan Angel, so here at the sacred center her rebirth occurs. It is here that her happiness is most nearly complete. When Angel suggests going to Sandbourne (Southampton) or London, Tess demurs: "All is trouble there; inside here is content" (498). But they both realize the happiness cannot last. When, after the woman, the agent of the outside world, discovers them and they sense they have been discovered, they go north and accidentally come upon Stonehenge, the symbolically correct last scene and conclusion (the literal final scene involving Angel and Liza-Lu is patently false) of the novel.

Tess has been moving, morally and emotionally, toward Stonehenge all along. Nothing could be more true than her statement that she is home at last. She descends, after all, from an ancient d'Urberville whose Christian name is Pagan, and she has progressed through her suffering, courage, and endurance to the nobility of character that the "heathen" stones emblemize. We can see how the description of Tess and Angel's arrival has been prepared by the previous imagery of the novel, particularly that of the garden at Talbothays:

They had proceeded thus gropingly two or three miles further when on a sudden Clare became conscious of some vast erection close in his front, rising sheer from the grass. They had almost struck themselves against it.

"What monstrous place is this?" said Angel.

"It hums," said she. "Hearken!"

He listened. The wind, playing upon the edifice, produced a booming tune, like the note of some gigantic one-stringed harp. (501)

The passage actually conflates the imagery and action of the garden and that of Flintcombe Ash. Hardy, however, gives us now no second-
hand harps or funny little phalluses—the “queer-shaped flints” of Flintcombe Ash (366)—but the larger-than-life pagan real thing. Just as Angel is “conscious of some vast erection in his front,” Hardy would have been perfectly aware of the double entendre of erection (the standard acceptable term then, as now, for tumescence). And the distance of how far Tess and the reader have travelled in the course of the novel is nowhere better represented than by the profound difference that obtains between the all-too-human thorn-prick of Alec in the beginning and the magnificent totem of the sarsen stone at the end. The one transcends the other as Tess transcends the humanity the novel depicts. And lest Angel, who seems to have made amends, be allowed a better judgment than he deserves, Hardy’s description of the stone as a “booming” harp settles definitively through implied contrast his second-rateness. This harp’s elemental note is naturally frightening. Yet it is to the harp-stone “rising sheer from the grass” and its music—she is now beyond Angel, beyond “humanity”—that Tess has progressed in any true reading of the novel. As the one individual who most nearly approaches the pagan, she has earned the right to say that she is “home.” Home, to be sure, is also death: there is no other place for her. Stonehenge, then, connects the imagery and locales of the novel. When Tess, Nature’s virginal daughter, lies upon the stone to sleep and to wait for the sun, the action is complete, the imagery (with the connections it makes) concluded.

I have tried to show what the “art” of this novel is on one significant level, that of language—the language, or imagery, which describes Nature or that, taken from Nature, which describes Tess. I have also tried to show the extent to which natural description can also be characterization. Moreover, where “structure” (as I have spoken of it) begins and language, or description, leaves off is impossible to say, since each, within the dimension I have been discussing, generates the other. Thus do the patterns of imagery and structure conjoin in Tess of the d’Urbervilles to achieve form. Whatever else we may say, Hardy’s language accounts as nothing else can for the unsettling motive power of Tess. Much of our pleasure comes from a growing intuitive sense of something large being worked through its language. For Tess is a radically subversive novel. And since it is the nature of subversion to operate secretively, beneath surfaces (as so much that is essential in Tess takes place in a linguistic underground), Hardy’s placing the blatant “erection” at the end directly in the reader’s course is as much as to say, here it is at last, in the open: I dare you to meet this novel on its own terms. To do so would be, of course, to enter the
thickly grown and sometimes moist and rank garden of its subtext and there to enjoy, or decry, the subversion. He would have been fairly confident that few would enter.

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NOTES

1Albert J. Guerard, for instance, who believes Hardy to be among our greatest novelists, nonetheless believes that one of his “greatest weaknesses” was “his tendency to shape and plan his works according to some obvious architectural principles and his failure to conceal the blueprint” (11-12). Miller probably speaks for a majority in arguing that the “internal structural principles” (Form xi) account for the form in Hardy's novels generally, not just in Tess. Jean R. Brooks, similarly, believes that Hardy's novels achieve formal integrity through a “charged poetic pattern.” Brooks says that the multiple perspectives work for the novels, and “even the unartistic facets contribute to the poetic whole” insofar as they contribute to an “emotional texture” (23).

2For instance, Miller notes the way that through “their bodies and in particular their sexual desires men and women are part of nature, driven by the same energies which lead to the growth of plants and animals” (Distance 80). But Miller does not here, or elsewhere in his discussion of Tess, engage the sexual imagery per se. Neither does Bruce Johnson in one of the best treatments of nature in Tess, “The Perfection of Species and Hardy's Tess,” though he does treat in fact sexual elements.

3Several studies, naturally enough, have paired or grouped Hardy with Lawrence. Among the best of these are works by John Paterson, John Alcorn, Ross C. Murfin, and Michael Squires. And, of course, D. H. Lawrence in the “Study of Thomas Hardy” is really, on the pretext of writing about Hardy, writing about Lawrence. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, these are all thematic studies. None really compare the two where some of the most interesting conclusions might be drawn, for Hardy's sexually charged language is a precursor to Lawrence's own in his later fiction.

4On one of these, speaking of the prospects of those sailing on the “Durbeyfield ship,” Hardy writes, “Some people would like to know whence the poet whose philosophy is in these days deemed as profound and trustworthy as his song is breezy and pure, gets his authority for speaking of ‘Nature’s holy plan’” (24). Wordsworth's naive Pantheism (as Hardy would consider it) is the precise counterpart of Angel's naive paganism.

5The Green Knight, of course, in Sir Gawain carried a holly bob, a symbol of his life-regenerating powers.

6Lodge is especially effective in showing many of the ways in which Tess is connected with Nature. See particularly 172-73.

7Few other novels contain so many important scenes of literal sleeping. Tess drives her father's cart to Casterbridge because he cannot be roused from sleep. Her accident and Prince's death occur because she falls asleep herself while driving. Tess is sleeping when Alec comes to her in the Chase. Angel, in his sleep, carries Tess over the bridge to the grave at Wellbridge Manor. Tess and Angel are
discovered while they are sleeping in the house in the New Forest. Tess is sleeping on the stone at Stonehenge while the sheriff’s men surround her.

Interestingly, Miller’s *Distance*, which we might think would treat the passage significantly, completely ignores it. Murfin has almost nothing to remark about it, and Mary Jacobus in her feminist reading of Hardy and several others also does not consider the passage, though she does consider the Tess-yawning description in sexual terms.

As the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests through numerous examples, *prick* in the sexual sense goes back at least to the 1500s. One has only to recall the “prick of noon”—not mentioned, however, by the *OED*—to appreciate its long-standing currency in the language. It would have been as difficult or unusual for Hardy as for a writer today not to be aware of the implications of the word, given its context and the subject matter of the novel. At any rate, phallic imagery seeds Hardy’s novels, much as the ground at Flintcombe Ash is seeded with little stone phaluses.

**WORKS CITED**


