ANGEL'S HELLENISM IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

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Critics of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* have always been extremely harsh on Angel Clare. Albert J. Guerard, for example, refers to the "insufferable" and even the "nasty" Angel Clare, and he says that Tess's purity, "already violated by Alec's selfish egoism, must now be violated by prudery."1 Dorothy Van Ghent, echoing Guerard, writes of Angel's "prudish perversity," and says that in his "conceited impotence" he manages to "violate Tess more nastily than her sensual seducer."2 And Arnold Kettle joins the chorus in calling Angel bad names and leaving matters at that: "Angel, with all his emancipated names, is not merely a prig and a hypocrite but a snob as well."3 But these critics do not see Angel Clare through Hardy's eyes at all. A brief comparison of their statements and terms with one or two of Hardy's own shows that the character he conceived is much more complex and more sympathetic than their epithets suggest. Hardy writes, for example: "It was the third day of the estrangement. Some might risk the odd paradox that with more animalism he would have been the nobler man. We do not say it. Yet Clare's love was doubtless ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability."4 These remarks, tolerant and restrained, are characteristic of Hardy's commentary in the novel; he does not seem to regard Angel as "nasty" or "perverse" or even "conceited." Later in the book he writes: "Clare had been harsh towards her; there is no doubt of it. Men are too often harsh with women they love or have loved; women with men. And yet these harshnesses are tenderness itself when compared with the universal harshness out of which they grow" (p. 304).

In the early chapters of the novel Angel Clare is put before us as a young man of liberal and independent spirit who is in revolt against many of the prevailing values, standards, and assumptions of his time and class. Contrasted with his stuffy brothers in the "club-walking" scene, Angel makes a distinctly favorable impression. To the horror of his brothers, for whom Tess and her friends are a "troop of country hoydens," Angel joins in the dancing and enjoys it. Later we hear more about his egalitarian principles in the attacks he makes upon the aristocratic principle, the ancient families, and hereditary wealth (he makes good his talk by marrying Tess). In matters of religion, where the pressures toward conformity in his case are strong, he also shows admirable independence. Against the grain of his father and family he refuses to take Orders in the
Church. His account of that hard decision puts considerations of his intellectual conscience before all others, including those of his own emotional bent: "I love the Church as one loves a parent. I shall always have the warmest affection for her. There is no institution for whose history I have a deeper admiration; but I cannot honestly be ordained her minister, as my brothers are, while she refuses to liberate her mind from an untenable redemptive theolatry" (pp. 101-02). On a more mundane level, Angel's character shows itself most attractively in his acceptance of the society of the uneducated workers and dairymaids at Talbothays: "He grew away from old associations, and saw something new in life and humanity" (p. 105). Angel's love for Tess and their marriage represent the farthest reaches of this movement toward "life and humanity." His proposal of marriage, given the facts of social class and background, amazes everyone: his brothers, the Cricks, the other dairymaids, and Tess herself. It is at once the most convincing proof of his escape from convention and of his capacity for love.

Many of the ideas and attitudes attributed to Angel are those of Hardy himself, and, though the character cannot really be considered a self-portrait, the lives of the fictional character and his creator show some striking parallels. We know from Hardy's "autobiography" that he, like Angel, seriously considered a vocation in the Church but rejected the idea for reasons of intellectual conscience. In 1865, living in London, and frustrated by the difficulty of combining architecture and poetry, Hardy "formed the idea of combining poetry and the Church," wrote to Cambridge, and nearly made the important step. But the plan "fell through less because of its difficulty than from a conscientious feeling, after some theological study, that he could hardly take the step with honour while holding the views which on examination he found himself to hold." Whether these views had to do with what Angel calls the "untenable redemptive theolatry" of the Church or that "Article Four" (which, of the Thirty-Nine, affirms the Resurrection) Angel refuses to "underwrite" (p. 102) is not clear, though these were matters with which many skeptical minds of the period were unsatisfied.

On social issues also Angel's ideas resemble Hardy's. Angel is said to have "increasingly despised" the "material distinctions of rank and wealth." Even the notion of the "good old family" has no appeal for him "unless there were good new resolutions in its representatives" (p. 103). These ideas, expressed recurrently in the novel and bearing profoundly on his relationship with Tess, resemble those Hardy ascribed to himself, writing in his journal on January 24, 1888, shortly before beginning work on the novel: "I find that my politics really are neither Tory nor Radical. I may be called an Intrinsicalist. I am against privilege derived from accident of any kind, and am therefore equally opposed to aristocratic privilege.
and democratic privilege.” The both Hardy and Angel Clare were thus studied, bookish men, though neither attended a university; both loved the Church, but neither took Orders: both were egalitarian, committed to “Life and humanity” rather than to class or creed: both pursued practical careers rather than university or Church (the one architecture, the other agriculture); both were musical; both lived in London, but retreated from its pressures and distractions to the country.

Above all, it is Angel’s effort at emancipation from the heritage of Christianity and his attempt to formulate for himself a new religious and moral creed that links him most closely with Hardy’s own concerns, both within and without the novel. This new creed of Angel’s, Hardy calls “Hellenic Paganism” (p. 304)

We know that Victorian Hellenism was a current of thought and feeling for which Hardy felt a good deal of attraction, if we take into account his affection for Greek literature, especially tragedy, for the work of such Hellenes as Shelley and Swinburne, and his extensive use of the Christian-Hellenic contrast in Jude the Obscure. In Angel, as in Sue Bridehead, we find that Hellenism is proposed as an alternative to Christianity. Angel is at his best in the novel when he affirms, against his father’s dour Calvinism, that “it might have resulted far better for mankind if Greece had been the source of the religion of modern civilization, and not Palestine” (p. 139). Earlier, Angel speaks to Tess of “pastoral life in ancient Greece” (p. 111), linking his work at Talbothays with his abstract ideal. Not only in thought, therefore, but in the realities of his life, Angel is a young man torn between conflicting allegiances to the Christianity of his immediate background and the Hellenism of his dreams. In his talk and thought, as Hardy says, Angel “persistently elevated Hellenic Paganism at the expense of Christianity” (p. 304).

Angel’s intellectual Hellenism, more than anything else in his character, is what makes him a “sample product of the last five-and-twenty years” (p. 235). Through him Hardy explores the human and subjective consequences of that adherence to Hellenism celebrated in the writings of Mill, Pater, Arnold and others. The Chapter on “Hebraism and Hellenism” in Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) was perhaps the most widely known celebration of Hellenism in the literature of the period, and on several points Arnold’s remarks about Hellenism and Hardy’s characterization of Angel Clare converge. “Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism,” Arnold writes, “is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiance; they are full of what we call sweetness and light. Difficulties are kept out of view, and the beauty and rationalness of the ideal have all our thoughts.” Angel is presented to us in terms very much like these; he is “more spiritual than animal; he had himself well in hand, and was singularly free from grossness” (p. 170).
In addition, Angel's critical rationalism, which leads him to favor reform in church and society, links him with what Arnold regarded as the central tenet of Hellenism, its free spirit of thought and enquiry. One of the major contentions of *Culture and Anarchy* is that "the development of our Hellenising instincts, seeking ardently the intelligible law of things, and making a stream of fresh thought play freely about our stock notions and habits, is what is most wanted by us at present." Finally, on the question of Christian asceticism versus the "wholeness" of the Greeks, Angel also appears to be an approximation of Arnold's ideal. Arnold emphasized the Greek ideal of the "development of the whole man" with its concern for beauty, the senses and physical exercise, and had contrasted Hellenism generally with the excessive spirituality of Hebraism and Christianity. Angel is obviously very much in revolt against the ascetic ideal of Emminster and is committed to what he thinks of as the "pagan" ways of Talbothays and to the "natural life" he finds there (p. 139).

In its confrontation with the problem posed by Tess's revelation of "sin," Angel's allegiance to his Hellenic Paganism receives its hardest test. Here his ability to make a "stream of fresh thought play freely about our stock notions and habits" (Arnold's words) breaks down temporarily, and he judges Tess according to notions and habits of mind inherited from the surrounding culture. He is not to be seen here as individually a prude, or as individually "nasty"; rather, he weakens, and acts in accord with values which prevail around him, failing temporarily to sustain his higher vision of things. His failure here seems to me to be primarily the result of Tess's own failure to explain her past prior to the marriage. Her shocking story of the liaison with Alec, and of the birth and death of a child, would be enough to unsettle any man, especially a man of the type Tess knows Angel to be. Hardy is quite hard on Tess over this point. He acknowledges that Angel's treatment of her is "cruel" but insists that it is the "cruelty of fooled honesty" (p. 205). He indicates that Tess had shown "culpable reticence" (p. 189) in not explaining herself to Angel earlier, since it is she, not Angel, who has violated the "social norm" (p. 303).

Hardy's major purpose, as he works through this difficult phase of the novel, is not to heap blame upon Angel individually (as critics have tended to do) but to get at the underlying cultural "notions and habits" that are blameworthy and in need of correction. Here is a characteristic passage of analysis:

With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings. (p. 235)
Here the real blame is laid not upon Angel himself, but upon his “early teachings.” He is essentially the victim of a “surprise” unconsciously engineered by Tess, and in these circumstances “custom and conventionality” re-assert themselves, causing the error in judgment.

In another passage Hardy refines the notion of “custom and conventionality” in the quotation above by discussing concretely the question of woman’s chastity before marriage. This is an ideal which in the novel is associated explicitly with Christian culture, and as Angel develops he comes to see it as another instance of the “parochialism” of Christianity. In his discussions with the influential stranger in Brazil, Angel achieves a new perspective on the moral dilemma in which he finds himself and defines once again the conflict within himself in terms of the opposition of Hellenism and Christianity:

His own parochialism made him ashamed by its contrast. His inconsistencies rushed upon him in a flood. He had persistently elevated Hellenic Paganism at the expense of Christianity; yet in that civilization an illegal surrender was not certain disesteem. Surely then he might have regarded that abhorrence of the intact state, which he had inherited with the creed of mysticism, as at least open to correction when the result was due to treachery. A remorse struck into him. (p. 304)\textsuperscript{12}

We can see from these passages that, although Hardy writes of “custom and conventionality,” he is not content to leave his analysis there. He traces these customs and conventions back to their origin in Christianity, specifically to that “abhorrence of the intact state” which he suggests is the basis of the Christian sexual ethic. Angel’s fixation on what he earlier calls “spotlessness” (p. 198) is not a peculiar whim of his own but has a definite source in his Christian upbringing and “early teachings” (p. 235).

At the end of the novel our hopes for the future center on the faith that society will overcome its “abhorrence of the intact state,” its cult of chastity inherited from Christianity, and will reconstitute its ethical laws and expectations so that they are more in harmony with Nature and experience (Angel has finally succeeded fully in doing this). We can see that Hardy’s several gibes at Christian optimism, the doctrine of Providence, and the notion of Universal Justice are merely corollaries of his main attack upon the unnatural and harmful moral standard which he defines as Christian. Like one of his contemporaries, Nietzsche, he suggests that Christian morality is a morality of self-denial—against the flesh, against the senses, against nature. In place of the Christian ethic he offers something akin to Angel’s Hellenic Paganism, an ideal defined in part by the healthy and happy life of Talbothays dairy. It is a life of hard work, physical enjoyments, candor and kindness. Talbothays is the major symbol of this world of positive values in the novel, while Em-
minster—a Christian world in extreme and pointed contrast to the pagan Talbothays—represents a spectrum of negative values—morbid spirituality, coldness, frugality, chastity and even snobbishness.

Both Tess and Angel finally make the transition from the negative world of Christian values and guilt to the Hellenic-Pagan one of freedom, love and self-fulfillment, though Hardy's tragic form prohibits a conventional happy ending and reminds us how difficult, how costly, moral progress is. The consummation of their growth as individuals and of their love for each other is the interlude at Bramshurst Court, where they achieve a happy union outside society and above their fate. The days there are the mark of their common liberation from the Christian moral orientation. Its ideal of "spotlessness" (p. 198) will keep them apart no longer. Angel, converted from the "parochialism" of the "creed of mysticism" (p. 304) by a stranger in Brazil; Tess, driven from it by the palpable injustices of her own case—both now understand Tess's real "purity," both are now free. At Stonehenge the heathen or pagan quality of their freedom is symbolically expressed. "One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home" (p. 351). Our final view of Tess is indeed as a martyr—not a Christian one, but the opposite, a heathen martyr for the values of a new, post-Christian era. As the representatives of the old law put their hands upon her, the sun is just beginning to rise.

NOTES

1 Thomas Hardy, A New Directions Paperbook (New York, 1964), p. 80.
6 Florence Emily Hardy, p. 204.
7 Florence Emily Hardy, pp. 28-34.
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10 *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 190.
11 *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 168-70, 184.
12 Angel's idea that in the civilization of "Hellenic Paganism" an "illegal surrender was not certain disesteem" may derive from W.E.H. Lecky's well-known *History of European Morals* (1869, and later editions). The final chapter of his two-volume work is devoted to "The Position of Women" and includes about twenty pages on women in ancient Greek culture. Lecky calls attention to the peculiarly honorable status of the hetaerae. His comments on the Greek view of life generally are also relevant; for example: "The Greek conception of excellence was the full and perfect development of humanity in all its organs and functions, and without any tinge of asceticism. Some parts of human nature were recognized as higher than others; and to suffer any of the lower appetites to obscure the mind, restrain the will and engross the life, was acknowledged to be disgraceful; but the systematic repression of a natural appetite was totally foreign to Greek modes of thought. Legislators, moralists, and the general voice of the people, appear to have applied these principles almost unreservedly to intercourse between the sexes, and the most virtuous men habitually and openly entered into relations which would now be almost universally censured" (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869), p. 308. There is no definite proof, however, that Hardy read Lecky. His ideas on the moral issues of the novel may derive from sources more frequently associated with him. Herbert Spencer, for example, in *The Data of Ethics* (London, 1879) expounds his central idea of the "evolution of morality," suggesting that the void left by the disappearance of a "supernatural ethics" must be filled with a natural one (p. iv). Spencer's sociological books could also be in the background here, particularly Part III of *The Principles of Sociology* (1876) which deals with "Domestic Institutions" and shows how indifferent non-Christian societies have often been to the question of chastity.

13 In a conversation at the time the novel was published, Hardy appears to have had second thoughts on this point, suggesting that Angel could never be completely reconciled with Tess. See Helmut E. Gerber and W. Eugene Davis, *Thomas Hardy: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Him* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1973), Item 162.