LANGUAGE AND THE SHAPE OF REALITY IN TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES

BY CHARLOTTE THOMPSON

The prime of the literary artist occasionally spawns the tour de force in which the maker’s art, having reached its apogee, begins to sport with and celebrate its own powers. As the offspring of Hardy’s artistic prime, Tess of the d’Urbervilles might claim kinship with these works of virtuosity, yet few readers, I suspect, will be prompted to include Tess alongside such better known candidates as Don Juan or The Tempest, not because Tess is wanting in observable brilliance, but because the novel’s somber character gives no indication of celebrating anything, certainly not the novelist’s art. Considered in terms of its context, Tess must probably remain weighted with its received label of “pessimism.” At the same time, beneath its sober level of discourse, at the substratum of formal arrangement and verbal and visual imagery, Tess contains an exhilarating feat of imagination in which the power of the word, if not exactly celebrated, is at least fully exploited and even parodied with a fine irony and a narrative sleight of hand that are pure bravura.

Access to this enterprise may be had by thoughtfully examining the novel’s use of the spoken word, especially the imaginative word, as a shaping force empowered to determine the nature of reality. Among the many forces that Hardy invites us to hold responsible for Tess’s tragedy, her society’s language constitutes one of its most potent, yet most elusive instruments. An old language, by fixing minds in old, preformed mental structures, can vie with old genes in the ability to perpetuate the past by impelling the mind toward predetermined ends. Conversely, language innovatively used in fresh, creative imagining has the power to reorganize those mental structures and to reform the realities they induce. At least Hardy thought so. Even as he was writing Tess he was evolving the ontological vision that would emerge allegorically in The Dynasts, and among his speculations was a clear belief in the mind’s power to influence, even alter, the material world.1 It is
this power of the imaginative mind working in *Tess* that, although not unnoticed, has been vastly underestimated and that I intend to show represents the ruling principle of *Tess*’s universe. The novel divides its mental influences into those of the past and those of the present. By exploiting the properties of an old, allusive vocabulary, Hardy makes out of past beliefs and imaginings a cultural logos, a communal word, composed of religious precedents, myths, legends, and names, which, in the manner of the biblical Logos, seeks to realize itself in living form and succeeds in the person and tragedy of Tess. But even as Tess is being brought to bay an unceasing process, reminiscent of Heraclitan flux, continues. The communal imagination of the novel’s present is relentlessly transmuting its universe and already formulating a new logos, a Romantic word, which, by the novel’s end, has begun to crystallize around the persons of Angel and 'Liza-Lu.

The novel’s strategies are best approached by identifying with some precision their achieved end, an end rather cryptically summed up in the title of Phase the Seventh: *Fulfillment*. Exactly what the novel’s ending fulfills is not as clear as it might be. Among its meanings, “fulfillment” signifies the consummation of something promised or previously adumbrated. When one sets aside fulfillment in the context of the story and turns instead to the formal structure, it becomes apparent that the novel’s end realizes a substantial number of ideas that have been shadowed in from the outset, and in this sense constitutes something of a wholesale fulfillment. When it comes to adumbrations, the discoveries of various critics indicate that *Tess* contains an almost inexhaustible system of foreshadowings, ranging from the legend of the White Hart to the thorns of Alec’s roses, whose intimations are methodically brought to fruition later, in the rape or in the murder and tragic conclusion. Foreshadowings and their realizations necessarily organize themselves into symmetries, the more striking of which emerge in the novel’s framing ends, where they lend the appearance of circularity and reinforce the impression of a history repeating itself in cycles. This appearance of repetition is somewhat deceptive, however.

In the framing symmetries, the initial materials reappear at the end, not duplicated or merely repeated with assumed differences, but having undergone a transformation in which the literal and the figurative have changed places. Prince the horse and Alec d’Urberville, both run through the heart, share a common identity

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as murdered "breadwinners." The significance of this repetition, however, rests in the difference between these breadwinners. Prince, the figurative "bread-winner," accidentally killed but figuratively "murdered," has been replaced by Alec, literal bread-winner, literally murdered. Framing these deaths are the enclosures where Tess begins and ends her story, the enclosure of the green with its fence and wicket, and the place "bespeaking captivity," also boasting a wall and wicket (328), a figurative cage given way to a literal prison. Tess first and last appears at the site of a pagan ritual, first in the road and enclosure, token sites of a token May rite, and last on the authentic pagan grounds of Stonehenge. As the novel passes from one end to the other, the narrative moves from adumbrations to realizations, from ideas expressed in a figurative sense to their fulfillments in a literal sense. Hardy's strategies direct themselves toward a culmination in which the novel's original materials have been exchanged for their mirror opposites.

A cluster of symmetries reveals similar exchanges; a rough inventory should suffice to demonstrate that Hardy's complex interplay of letter and figure, the nominal and the actual, extends well beyond the bounds of simple literary foreshadowing. On her first excursion from Marlott, Tess sets out to claim her literal kin but meets instead figurative kin, d'Urberville, the cousin-in-quotes who in many ways is her real husband. As Tess draws near her family vaults at Kingsbere, her last excursion from Marlott begins with a figurative claiming of kin but ends in the literal reclamation of her then nominal husband, Angel, who in turn becomes her real husband. Meanwhile, pressured into becoming d'Urberville's mistress, Tess in her finery has at least outwardly metamorphosed into that "other woman" whose image began in Angel's disen-chanted imagination (192), while Angel, for his part, has begun to realize his name as closely as life will allow: "You could see the skeleton behind the man, and almost the ghost behind the skeleton" (304). From a wider perspective, William R. Herman observes that symmetries are not confined to the time enclosed by the novel but extend at least as far back as the first d'Urberville, Sir Pagan, whose name is realized in Tess on the pagan altar at Stonehenge. This fulfillment gains strength from both the periodic association of Tess with pagan earth goddesses and the sacrificial overtones of her death. As the figurative evolves into the literal and the nominal approaches the actual, the verbal coagulates into

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the substantial. Two messages, Parson Tringham’s message to Durbeyfield and the message of Tess’s death, herald the story’s beginning and its end: the former with an abstract verbal message, the latter with the stuff of the black flag; the first already presaging death in words (“‘how are the mighty fallen’”), the last signalling the accomplished fall with a tangible thing. Early in the novel Joan predicts success with the upstart d’Urbervilles, saying, “‘She ought to make her way with ’en, if she plays her trump card aright’” (43). By the end, the “trump card” materializes in blood and plaster, “a gigantic ace of hearts” painted on the ceiling below the scene of Alec’s murder (316).

With the list by no means exhausted, a pattern emerges in which ideas materialize. Words are given flesh, given concrete form, in fact, with the chiselling of Tringham’s text, “‘How Are the Mighty Fallen,’” onto Durbeyfield’s tombstone. The irony grows more profound as the novel gives flesh to the narrative word. Parallel scenes find Tess sleeping just prior to her undoing, first in the Chase, where her vulnerability inspires the narrator to remark, “But, might some say, where was Tess’ guardian angel?” (62), and then again at Stonehenge, where a sleeping Tess now has a very literal Angel standing guard (327). The power of the word to realize itself achieves its zenith in the transmutation of Tess, sensitive and compassionate, into a murderess, begun with the merest suggestion: “Her face was dry and pale, as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess” (28). Similarly, the high-minded Angel moves toward his destiny as accomplice from the moment “he rose in the light of a dawn that was ashy and furtive, as though associated with crime” (197). Tess’s symmetries are obverse symmetries, a structural pattern of significant change. Within a shape of cyclical repetition the novel produces not replications but realizations, over the course of its progress giving literal forms to a body of ideas that have originated in a symbol, an abstraction, a name, or a fleeting impression in the imagination. Certainly among the ideas introduced are those in the service of artistic prolepsis, such as the hint of Tess as a murderess. But when foreshadowings begin to materialize within a massive pattern, prolepsis exceeds its artistic functions and begins to assume the formidable character of a causal force.

Indeed, when words become things, the speakers of those words become unwitting agencies of destiny. Some of these agencies be-

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long to a time prior to the novel, while the influential word continues to be spoken over the course of the narrative. That these speakers are unaware of their potency is nowhere more fruitfully demonstrated than in the case of the narrator, cynically noting the absence of a heavenly guardian, only to have that absence soon remedied by the appearance of Angel. Clearly, the narrator does not have complete command over the universe he sets before the reader; his demystified comments do not wholly account for a system that can produce out of itself a likeness to the very thing he complains is lacking. Yet the narrator is no mere chronicler. In the act of relating events he also interprets them and transmits the interpretations of his characters. And these interpretations, made in passing and not after the fact, subtly exert a shaping influence upon the events themselves. The narrator, then, together with his characters, participates in a process by which the imagination unselfconsciously modulates the nature of reality. The imaginative word, whether Joan’s “trump card” or the narrator’s “guardian angel,” seems, moreover, to find a listener who is neither narrator, character, nor reader, but an unnamed mechanism, sensitive and eager, perhaps a little overeager, to respond by producing the thing named.

The limitations of this mechanism appear most clearly in the very literal guardian Angel bodied forth. Angel constitutes a definite improvement in watchmen over Tess but hardly satisfies the requisites of a heavenly warder. The somewhat clumsy and literal way in which this mechanism fulfills the word conforms handsomely to Hardy’s conception of a universal consciousness as he described it to William Archer. He saw incompleteness as characteristic of all phenomena and “of the universe at large.” As to that universe, Hardy said that it often seemed to him “like a half-expressed, an ill-expressed idea.” Referring then to von Hartmann’s Philosophy of the Unconscious, Hardy went on to discuss a solution to the origin of evil in the theory “that there may be a consciousness, infinitely far off, at the other end of the chain of phenomena, always striving to express itself, and always baffled and blundering.” By the well-meaning but heavy-handed provision of Angel on the scene, the novel hints at an unseen force in close accord with Hardy’s conjectures which, among the many responsible for the action, deserves to be counted. Whether or not one defines the novel’s mechanism as a universal consciousness,
there is sufficient evidence that something in Tess's world, beyond the knowledge and control of the narrator, is systematically giving form to the constructs of the human mind.

According to Albert J. Guerard, Hardy believed literally "in the imagination's power over matter—in the power of mind to effect bodily changes." He viewed the material world as the Platonic shadow of reality, "not the real—only the visible, the real being invisible optically." Some time prior to Tess's publication, Hardy included in his literary notes comments on the theories of a mental universe analogous to the physical one, and he preceded these entries with a speculation inspired by the findings of Pasteur:

Just as M. Pasteur can show that the introduction of an infinitesimal germ into the blood can so alter the whole constitution of the blood that the destiny of the being ... is wholly altered, so the history of our inward life can prove that the introduction of a spiritual germ into the mind of man can ... make his life and death totally differ things. ...

Thus thought shapes the very world: matter creates thought: reciprocal action.

By the time of Tess's composition Hardy had contemplated mutual interactions of mind and matter and the power of mind to effect transfigurations of the material. The ideas that intrude into Tess's universe—Tringham's message, for example, or the idea of "murderess" that intrudes into a character's mind—bear more than a passing resemblance to Pasteur's germs in their power to produce dramatic alterations in events. Meanwhile, Hardy's appended conclusion on a creative reciprocity of mind and matter best subsumes his complex exchanges in Tess, not all of which are in one direction.

Literal herons, for instance, endowed with metaphoric "doors and shutters" (111), watching the lovers in chapter 20, reappear in the lodging house, the figurative "Herons," there equipped, we assume, with physical doors and shutters. In this case, substance (herons) dissolves into idea ("Herons") while idea ("doors and shutters") materializes into substance. Similarly, if the palpable black flag displaces the abstract message it conveys, it also displaces the once substantial Tess. No longer visible after her capture, Tess becomes an idea, and the idea solidifies in the black flag. A contrapuntal movement complicates the simple notion of idea turned into substance, certainly of its being made "real." Hardy effectively
raises without answering the questions: what constitutes a real murderess? a real husband? a real d’Urberville? He poses these questions within a universe whose phenomena fluctuate between symbolic and concrete expression without necessarily ever bodying forth precisely the things themselves. Tess is first a figurative, then a literal murderess; but is she ever a real murderess? Neither she nor her ancestor incarnates a genuine pagan. Between the figurative pagan rite, trump card, and guardian angel and their material counterparts the authentic article remains curiously missing. Trace, for example, the fate of Tringham’s text. The message, a figurative “word” condensed into literal words (“how are the mighty fallen”) that are themselves a metaphor, returns to abstract symbols, letters, in which form it is transfixed in stone, while the meaning has eluded Durbeyfield from beginning to end. J. Hillis Miller notes that the actuality of Tess’s death is wholly concealed from the reader behind the black flag, which displaces the idea as the idea displaces the event itself.17 Essential truths remain occulted—the meaning of the words, the reality of death, the real nature of a d’Urberville—while the phenomena surrounding them perpetuate themselves by shifting their forms.

If the ultimate reality remains elusive, the knowable universe at least assumes an implicit shape, separated into a dichotomy of substance and idea. Already prefiguring the biform Earth and Overworld of The Dynasts, an ontological model suggests itself as if in answer to the question posed by Joubert a century earlier: “if at the border of the material world one extends one’s arm, where would it be?”18 In Tess, the material seems to extend into the simultaneously present dimension of idea, the mirror opposite of the material world, substance and idea forming two halves of a totality and interacting in that “flux and reflux” (291) out of which the entire order of the empirical world is eventually inverted. At best this universe is an unstable compound. Ideas tend to assume palpable form while the palpable shows a marked inclination to abandon its corporeality and fly off into the abstract—a propensity resonating through the novel in drinkers, in whirling dancers, in objects that throw a shadow, but mostly in frequent excursions of the imagination: “The stage of mental comfort to which they had arrived at this hour was one wherein their souls expanded beyond their skins, and spread their personalities warmly through the room” (20–21); “They followed the road with a sensation that they were soaring along in a supporting medium. . . . They were as

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sublime as the moon and the stars above them, and the moon and stars were as ardent as they” (55); “lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all” (102); “his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers—allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will” (314). Two complementary impulses are at work in Tess’s world: the impulse of ideas to realize themselves in forms and the impulse to escape from forms and return to the abstract. Out of these come the transactions across the border dividing the phenomenal world from the realm of idea that culminate in the interchanges observed in the novel’s superstructure.

These interchanges, however, have ascended to a high level of abstraction, shiftings between figurative and literal senses of words, after lesser exchanges within the novel which this study will examine closely below, but which, for the moment, might be viewed as resembling experiments with increasingly finer materials. The narrator works with “vegeto-human pollen” in chapter 10, when he mixes peat scroff, pollen, rustics, light, and perspiration to transform a country dance into a bacchanalia and bucolics into “a multiplicity of Pans whirling a multiplicity of Syrinxes” (53), spiraling into a complete interchange “in which emotion was the matter of the universe, and matter but an adventitious intrusion” (54). Materials are coarse, and the understood divisions of reality into matter and emotion more crude and earthbound than those into substance and idea, let alone purely verbal divisions. Episodes of intermingling proceed on the walk homeward, where the revellers and nature “joyously interpenetrated each other” (55), using finer substances, as the “fumes of their breathing” mingle with the night mist, and the “spirit of the scene” seems “to mingle with the spirit of wine” (58), progressing, at Talbothays’ garden, to those borderline phenomena that barely hold membership in the physical world: “harmonies”; “dampness”; “waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound” (104). Having reached Joubert’s outer limit, the process turns to the inward sensibilities of lovers, “the gravitation of two into one” so that “something had occurred which changed the pivot of the universe for their two natures” (128). Images of intermixture, extended to the most impalpable, and inversions in the order of the universe, carried to the innermost

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psyche, indicate a process of exchange that penetrates to the minutiae of the novel’s substances.

These exchanges take place through the agency of the interpreting mind, and the instrument effecting change is the rhetorical figure. By manipulating language the narrator transgresses the border dividing the factual from the imaginary. He has only to omit those connecting words of similitude—“as if”; “as though”; “seems like”—that maintain a tenuous barrier between the phenomenal world and its counterpart in the realm of mind, and lor a metaphor transforms a downhome stomp into an Arcadian revel and accomplishes an interchange of matter and emotion. In contrast to these heavy-handed beginnings, the novel’s crowning achievement deals in the fragile tissues of human nature. Delicate Tess, “this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer” (62), receives only a breath of suggestion to begin her transmutation: “as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess.” Observe the comparable delicacy of the rhetoric, the vaporous simile with its multiple steps of distance between suggestion and assertion, the ambiguity surrounding the source of this impression, whether Tess or the narrator. The resulting interchange, turning figurative criminals into literal ones, exchanging figurative bread-winners and pagan sites for literal ones, has been similarly refined, above matter and emotion or substance and idea, into the figure and the letter, a duality existing only at the level of language. Tess’s culminating interchanges are definable only in terms of language. The first crude division of the world into matter and emotion, rooted in the physical, at length attains the rarefied realm of symbols, words, and ideas. Hardy’s structure of reality, attenuated to its utmost, resolves into a wholly intellectual model that oscillates upon the turning of words. An inverted world consists, finally, of a series of inverted words. According to this logic, manipulation of the word constitutes a manipulation of empirical reality.

Manipulation of the word is, in fact, the only possibility allowed the narrator, or for that matter, the novelist, who, unlike a divine Creator, cannot bring something out of nothing with a wholly original Word but, more like an alchemist, is limited to a creative rearrangement of existing materials. Hardy invites this comparison by encompassing this novel in seven Phases, a number suggestive of the Creation, but also of the traditional seven phases of alchemy. An attempt to identify progress in Tess with the process of creation not only fails, but leads instead to considering the prob-

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lems of creation, or of performing any original action in this intensely deterministic world, whose processes seem bent instead on decreation, on eradicating the heroine altogether. Its world is anything but mint-new. As readers well know, Hardy has taken pains to set forth Tess’s world as an old one, its original coinage lost in the mists of an ancient past, its landscape still instinct with a venerable history, its inhabitants new reiterations of old family forms and often deteriorated from the pristine.\textsuperscript{20} If anything, Tess presents a world run down and wanting rejuvenation. As the novel repeats its actions in cyclical patterns and its love story begins to reform around Angel and 'Liza-Lu at the end, the novel itself intimates that the best an earthbound creator can accomplish is a reformation of extant materials. Whatever creative forces prove to be at work would be better defined as recreative.

On the other hand, the narrative process in Tess shows observable correspondences to alchemy, provided we are willing to regard the alchemical process as an alchemy of rhetoric. If rhetoric organizes a verbal universe, so do rhetorical figures reorganize it, as instruments of the imagination carrying the special power to transform a given order. Even in the examples above, one notes the narrator’s rhetorical figures intermixing his substances and inverting the empirical order of things, elsewhere reducing Angel to a “skeleton” or Tess to a free-floating spirit and subliming the drunken rustics into the “spirit of the scene.” By presenting 'Liza-Lu as a second Tess yet more pure (362, 369), Hardy also provides grounds for considering the goal of this process in alchemical terms. The universe, expunging Tess and replacing her with 'Liza-Lu, would seem to be refining itself, subliming Tess in death, yet in the process ridding itself of its dross in order to achieve a purified form. While the novel’s images of intermixture suggest a refining process, more obvious concerns with purity trace a path from the Pure Drop Inn, through the Clares’ preoccupation with the purity of Angel’s wife, to the village of Marlott’s wish to purify itself by ejecting the Durbeyfields (292). In addition, the language of alchemy, chiefly reduction, sublimation, and transmutation, recurs with unusual frequency.

Another expression of self-refinement threads through the novel as entities, once given forms, show a certain desire to leave those forms, to seek transformation and rise, whether up the social ladder or out of the body altogether. The most obvious means of transformation is through the imagination, as one notes in Tess,
imagining herself outside her body, or the revellers, imagining themselves transcended to astral sublimity. To V. M. K. Kelleher, the dreams and fantasies reveal a consistent tendency to posit “a better, brighter version of reality,” a tendency shared by both Angel’s sleepwalking dream and Durbeyfield’s delusions of grandeur.21 Behind these patent examples, a more subtle and pervasive expression of this impulse lies in the use of figurative language. From Joan, unthinkingly using a figure of speech, to the narrator, self-consciously reconstituting the country dance, the mind habitually presses out of the mundane to enhance and generally to transform its existence through imaginative language. Man in the novel instinctively seeks to turn a leaden world into a golden one, as the drinkers do at Rolliver’s:

In this process the chamber and its fixtures grew more and more dignified and luxurious; the shawl hanging at the window took upon itself the richness of tapestry; the brass handles of the chest of drawers were as golden knockers; and the carved bedposts seemed to have some kinship with the magnificent pillars of Solomon’s temple.22

The mind, then, works its imaginative alchemy upon reality, and figurative language affords the tool as well as the testimony of its unending thrust toward the ideal.

Close scrutiny of the novel’s figurative language shows two linguistic forces at work—one innovative, the other reactionary—each defining reality out of its properties, each endowed with its own figurative vocabulary. A limited set of clear, straightforward rhetorical figures—similes, metaphors, personifications—proceeds from fresh acts of imagination performed by the narrator or his characters and originating within the circumference of the novel’s action. When examined, these verbal images, together with visual images, prove to constitute a recreative force whose permutations work gradually to reorganize the existing order. Established order, in contrast, expresses itself in an imaginative language from the past: a vast corpus of figurative and quasi-figurative words, of images, epithets, and allusions drawn from a traditional vocabulary that owes its being to the entrenched ideas of Western culture. Born of early theologies, this language derives from acts of imagination or interpretation performed centuries earlier, yet which continue to exert their influence upon the novel’s personae and upon the reader as well. Phenomena are imprisoned in asso-

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ciations imposed by the language used to describe them: “Valley of Humiliation” (106); “River of Life” (87); “‘witch of Babylon’” (268); “‘the old Other One’” (289); “Plutonic master” (270). By applying this language to their experience, the novel’s personae perform acts of interpretation more mechanical and ritualistic than spontaneous, interpretations not ultimately of their own making but handed down from generations past. Accompanying this allusive vocabulary is a substantial body of words whose usage is neither wholly literal nor wholly figurative. Words such as fall, reaper, pure, harvest, web, trap, halo, and light, although often used literally, assume figurative meanings nonetheless, telling a story of their own by virtue of their longstanding associations in the cultural mind. Alec’s “trap” offers a case in point. A language originally formulated to describe the physical world, having for centuries been pressed into the service of defining social, moral, psychological, and theological realms of experience, has become so saturated with connotative values that it can no longer be detached from them, no longer used in its pristine form to describe accurately the reality of the moment. When language, used literally, rises up irrepressibly into secondary and tertiary meanings, the boundaries between literal and figurative have been obliterated. This language is a worn-down text, like the Compleat Fortune-Teller, “so worn by pocketing that the margins had reached the edge of the type” (18).

A text that has lost its margins suggests, additionally, a text whose letters persist but the key to whose interpretation has disappeared. In the biblical tradition, and in the King James Bible, the margins contain the explanatory gloss, so that to lose the margins is to be left with only the letter and not the spirit of the text. Similarly, this well-worn language, by habitual usage, loses something of its original meaning, while the letter perseveres with an oppressive power to impose the past upon the present. Just as Angel leaves his words with Tess (who “adhered with literal exactness to orders which he had given and forgotten” [282]) and goes off, still retaining his control over her, so the originators of the language have vanished but continue to exert a sometimes tyrannical influence over their descendants. Hardy offers parallel instances in which words from absent speakers reshape a character’s attitude. Parson Clare’s words, which he likens to seeds planted (141), not only reform but transfigure Alec d’Urberville

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(253) well after the Parson and Alec have parted company. Next, Angel’s dicta, repeated to Alec through Tess, reconvert “the late Evangelist” back to his original worldliness (269, 272). Words uttered by a vanished stranger also revolutionize Angel’s perspective: “The cursory remarks of the large-minded stranger, of whom he knew absolutely nothing beyond a commonplace name, were sublimed by his death, and influenced Clare more than all the reasoned ethics of the philosophers” (283). Elsewhere, Hardy calls attention to the power of the departed to manipulate from the grave, but in this case through the power of music:

She thought, without exactly wording the thought, how strange and godlike was a composer’s power, who from the grave could lead through sequences of emotion, which he alone had felt at first, a girl like her who had never heard his name, and never would have a clue to his personality.

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Old ideas reproducing themselves through old words enjoy an equal potential for extending the minds of unknown speakers. Unlike music, however, old language tends to become blurred, its meanings moribund, or misconstrued and misapplied. Tringham also leaves his words with Durbeyfield and disappears. But he fails to provide a gloss on his text, and it is the misapplication as much as the content of his message that wreaks destruction in the life of Tess. A language transmitted and running down through time conforms to a general motif of deterioration from a past original, exemplified in the d’Urberville lineage, declined and corrupted linguistically to Durbeyfield, and misappropriated by Stoke-d’Urberville.

The power this old language holds over the minds of the characters is directly proportional to its degeneracy. It has a biblical word for every occasion, but especially the occasion of guilt, which it can label efficiently, if not accurately. It brands Tess, who “looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence” (72), with a ready biblical image: “He little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side” (110). With no greater accuracy, biblical language serves man’s need to magnify himself with such images as inflate Tess’s misadventure with Alec into having “eaten of the tree of knowledge” (88), and her subsequent pain into a crucifixion by the “thorny crown” she figuratively wears (125). Biblical texts supply comfortable replacements for objective

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thought as handy words from Lemuel define the good woman for the Clares but somehow fail to pinpoint the special purity still unsullied in Tess. Alec, too, self-described as "‘the old Other One’" (289), or "‘the Old Adam’" (255), can cite Scripture for his purposes with equally ready words from Hosea on the woman who vainly sought her lover and returned to her first husband (274–75). But Tess’s lover does return. Hosea proves a rather untrustworthy index of truth. A biblical vocabulary provides convenient models with which to explain or to misunderstand experience. Tess’s sufferings compare to Job’s (106), her worship of Angel’s wisdom to the Queen of Sheba’s wonderment at Solomon’s (106); Clare is likened to Samson, reviewing the damage after his tragic wedding night (210); Parson Clare compares to Abraham and his "misnamed Angel" to a "doomed Isaac" (281); Alec suggests that his encounter with Tess in the garden plot resembles the meeting of Eve and the Tempter in paradise (289). Should anyone consider Tess as promiscuous as Mary Magdalen or as wicked as Delilah, and Angel Christlike or a sacrificial lamb led to the slaughter, or the garden allotment a paradise, he would find nothing inapt in these borrowed robes from the Scriptures. A thoughtful reappraisal should find them a bit grotesque in their misfit.23 In the minds of these compulsive interpreters, reality becomes contorted to fit ancient stereotypes. And a change of mind consists of not a liberation from biblical language but a change in text, as when an enlightened Angel reconciles himself to his wife’s past, saying, "Was not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer?" (284):

he had seen the virtual Faustina in the literal Cornelia, a spiritual Lucretia in a corporeal Phryne; he had thought of the woman taken and set in the midst as one deserving to be stoned, and of the wife of Uriah being made a queen; and he had asked himself why he had not judged Tess constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed?

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How, rather, can he judge accurately anything that has been so thoroughly exchanged for a catalogue of ready-made types?

This language seems to corrupt the narrative voice, which begins free of it, as an innocent on a blighted star, and ends by succumbing to its vernacular. Aloof from theology, the narrator nonetheless presents the River Froom as "clear and pure as the River of Life shown to the Evangelist" (87) and sees a "Last Day lurid-

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ness” in the fires of the wedding night (190). A mythophile, but by no means a believer in the “old-time heliolatries” (73), he has, by the sixth Phase, lapsed into something like a parody of the language in which his characters think:

He who had wrought her undoing was now on the side of the Spirit, while she remained unregenerate. And, as in the legend, it had resulted that her Cyprian image had suddenly appeared upon his altar, whereby the fire of the priest has been wellnigh extinguished.

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Much of this language represents an extension of Tess’s thoughts. All the same, the “Cyprian image” cannot possibly spring from the mind of a girl who elsewhere does not even know the name “Artemis” (111). Instead, the narrative voice shines through, caught up in the language of mythology, the same affinity that prompts the “Aeschylean Phrase” on the President of the Immortals. “Mythology,” wrote Hardy, “according to the comparative mythologists, is, forsooth, only a disease in language—literal understanding of primitive metaphors.” This “disease in language” has the power virtually to obliterate reality by systematically replacing a living event with a construct of the past, just as Angel replaces a living Tess with his mythological and biblical women. As “fire” replaces desire, and “priest” replaces Alec, “Cyprian image” replaces Tess, until the characters have lost their identities, and the true nature of the event has been swallowed up into a prefabricated drama to be construed accordingly in a preconceived way. From the past a scenario of guilt and sacrifice in blood imprints itself upon the cultural mind, reproduces itself in words, and works its way inexorably toward realization. If this process begins with ideas introduced into the imagination as germs into the bloodstream, then the first of these verbal “germs” is biblical, Tringham’s “‘How are the mighty fallen,’ ” and the effect is a kind of linguistic disease: an accelerating use of biblical and mythological language that proves contagious to the sybaritic Alec, the philosophical Angel, and the rationalistic narrator and proves, moreover, deadly to Alec and Tess.

Hardy objectifies this growing blight upon the mental landscape in the episode of the sign painter, who similarly blights the countryside as he proliferates his texts wherever space will permit. His words, burning in red and oddly propped up by commas, give

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visible form to the insistent, inflexible character of this language. His uncompromising “tex” provokes Tess to complain of his words: “I think they are horrible . . . Crushing! Killing!’ ‘That’s what they are meant to be!’ he replied” (67–68). Indeed, the letter killeth, especially when separated from the spirit. The inappropriateness to the actual state of things, together with the speaker’s lament for a moribund theology (67), reminds us that this old message exists somehow out of context, unsuited to define the reality into which it intrudes. In the same way, biblical and mythological constructs, formulated two thousand years earlier, impose themselves relentlessly upon a present that they are ill-equipped to define with precision. By their persistence, these constructs determine men’s thoughts and inevitably their lives. The accompanying language, perpetuated by the desire to amplify experience, continually detaches itself from reality and rises toward the ideal or toward allegory, forcing thought into those aesthetic categories that Kierkegaard saw as separating man from his ability to see the unvarnished truth.25 Far from impeding imagination, this old language impels imagination, but impels it toward predetermined ends.

A subtle compulsion to replace empirical with symbolic thinking reaches its consummate expression in Tess’s final actions. Tess habitually perceives her life in biblical analogies. Many have noted her moralized view of reality and her susceptibility to the beliefs of her society.26 Although she possesses natural wisdom and attains considerable understanding, she nonetheless exemplifies that astute but unsophisticated mind that is prone to overlook the complexities of men such as Alec and Angel and to conceive of them in oversimplified, moralized terms. Tess may insist that she does not see Alec as diabolical (289), yet she is unable to transcend a certain mental fixation in which Angel appears godlike.27 The moralization of Angel’s adversary is thus inevitable. Her final actions indicate that, in the end, Angel and Alec have been distilled in her mind to the simple contraries of “good” and “evil.” Alec’s destruction has been comparably moralized and simplified: a destruction of evil, an act of cleansing and reparation, which produces little guilt and more a feeling of liberation;28 concomitantly, a martyrdom to the godlike Angel seems equally justified by the same errors of thinking. By responding more to a symbolic than an empirical reality, Tess fulfills a scenario less of her own than of the culture that produced such symbolic thought.

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A cultural consciousness, striving to reproduce itself, offers another, more viable way of understanding the universal mechanism working to realize ideas in substance. The tendency of ideas to materialize comes to its most pertinent focus in the pressures of a cultural scenario working toward fulfillment in Tess. Ideas resident in the cultural mind—the Fall of Man, the Crucifixion, pagan vegetation myths or sacrifices to the sun god, folk legends surrounding the d’Urbervilles or the terrain—planted in the minds of the novel’s personae, express themselves in a conventional vocabulary, crystallize around events, urge a disregard of the idiosyncratic, and impel conformity to ancient models, effecting what Miller aptly calls the “irresistible coercion of history.” By forcing the plastic substances of the present into the rigid molds of the past, this process might compare to the alchemical procedure known as fixation. In any event, language as much as plot urges the impression of an old culture drama being repeated, so that reference to Aeschylus, for instance, suggests to Miller that “Tess reincarnates a pattern of tragic experience already present in the earliest masterpieces of Western literature.” The hybrid character of this tragic pattern, with its mixture of pagan, classical, biblical, and folk elements, attests to the amalgam of cultural ideas that go into its formation and are reflected in the figurative hodgepodge spoken by the narrator and by Angel.

Although Tess is the ostensible victim of these cultural pressures, it is in the reader’s mind that the attendant language achieves its ultimate impact, and his mind, therefore, that is also being skillfully manipulated. By a subtle coercion of the reader’s associations, these same cultural forces help to create the tight cyclical structure into which Tess is bound and from which she escapes, incidentally, only after language has been broken down to the monosyllable “O-O-O!” (314–15). The novel exploits basic metaphors of Western culture and stock associations to the language of space and time to knit together the novel’s topography, the cycle of the year, and the motions of the narrative in close correspondences, such as those discussed by Andrew Enstice. The crooked lane traversed has its counterpart in Tess’s wayward path; every ascent or descent in the landscape, in the rises and falls of her hopes, fortunes, or moral status; the diurnal or seasonal phase in her symbolic beginnings, rebirths, purgatorial suffering, or return to a point of origin. In the first six Phases, a typical chapter locks human action first in time, then in space, as it moves

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into the narrative, fixing associations in this pattern. Only after d’Urberville’s murder, in Phase the Seventh, does the pattern break down and the narrative move freely across the chapters, relatively unfrozen from time and space. Words, brilliantly chosen from the cultural repertoire, provide the binding glue for this tight structuring. Ascent and descent, for example, join topographical contours with motion through the landscape, connotations of social mobility, moral fluctuations, and suggestions of spiritual directions, expanding, meanwhile, to embrace hints of genealogical ascent and descent, permuting into sublimation and deterioration, all motifs of the novel. Fall and harvest similarly unite seasonal, moral, and eschatological values. Fall, a multivalent word with seasonal, physical, social, moral, and theological meanings, is so entrenched in the cultural mind that it can be entirely displaced, as it is by October and autumn, without losing any of its associative power. Out of an ancient tendency to link human experience with the processes of the natural world, and to attach that experience to the mystic, comes a language by which Hardy connects the different realms of the novel’s universe, from the inorganic to the transcendental—a transcendental in which Hardy did not believe, but one in which his readers frequently do, and gratuitously supply. Creation of this structure requires the complicity of the reader. It is in his mind that images and words tend to rise from the physical world where they are rooted in literal meanings, upward toward abstraction and to assume figurative meanings, where descent downhill becomes a metaphor for the movement toward catastrophe or a fall from innocence and the harvest season assumes a parallel to the moral reaping of consequences or a theological Day of Judgment. In this way, the reader, although convinced by the narrator of his ability to distinguish fact from fancy, may become nonetheless an unwitting participant in the formation of this large, cyclical structure and pervasive metaphor. He receives considerable help from the plenitude of references—to Satan, Apollo, Adam and Eve, and Artemis—sprinkled throughout the novel. So, when Angel compares the dawn to the “Resurrection hour” (110) or calls Tess “Demeter” (111), he voices associations lurking within many a reader and generating impulses to connect the story to the Christian Passion or to pagan vegetation myths.32

By pursuing this inclination for a moment it is possible to observe how such mythic structures obey the second directive of

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Hardy’s fictional universe: the tendency of tangible things to move toward abstraction. Biblical or mythical constructs tend to waft upward toward allegory, but in alternations between the assumption of form and the dissolution of form back into the ideal. The mind first moves away from the substantial as it exchanges the characters—Tess, Alec, Angel—for their counterparts in biblical or mythological narrative, where the characters do not evaporate but take on another human form, be it Christ, Apollo, Eve, nymph, or Satan. These forms in turn refer the mind to the abstractions they embody, to the Deity, love, sacrifice, woman, guilt, nubile maidenhood, virility, or evil and, as embodiments of ideas, dissolve back into the impalpable. Small-scale myths behave as the large. The country dancers, metamorphosed into Pans, Lotisies, Syrinxes, and Sileni, are abstracted into an imaginary dimension, but one in which they have taken another human form. From these forms the mind escalates toward abstraction: the panting lechery and fleeing innocence that legend has invested in these figures. In addition, this metaphor approaches a perfect mirror image of the reality it transforms. Whereas these rural Lotisies and Syrinxes are formed from a mixture of man and organic nature (peat scroff, hay, and pollen), they refer to legendary figures who were inversely transformed from human into vegetable forms. Lotis and Syrinx are themselves symbols of metamorphosis. The metaphor doubles back on itself. The abstract (threatened virginity), having assumed form (Lotis and Syrinx), evaporates again into second level abstraction (metamorphosis). Myth and metaphor, striving to express another reality, create only pauses in the mind’s ascent, in which the assumption of new forms leads onward toward the abstractions that originally invested the forms with meanings.

Some of Hardy’s visual images illustrate the same principle, as objects share with words and myths this tendency to sublime. The revellers, weaving home from the country dance, extend into shadows: “and as they went there moved onward with them, around the shadow of each one’s head, a circle of opalized light, formed by the moon’s rays upon the glistening sheet of dew” (58). Shadows assume human shape, but the “halo” sanctifies, idealizes that shape, pressing away from the grosser clay of the farmhand toward the shapes of the metaphysical. Just as substance dissolves into idea and idea rematerializes into substance, so the revellers reduce to shadows and the shadows assume the new forms of

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saints, and saints in turn lead the mind toward the mystical unknown. Elsewhere, the milchers are reduced by the narrator's eye to a "circle on two stalks," in which form they are projected by the sun, which "threw shadows of these obscure and homely figures every evening with as much care over each contour as if it had been the profile of a Court beauty" (89). Milchers reduce to abstract shapes, shapes extend to shadows, to new forms enhanced by the narrator's simile into "Court beauty," and by means of the abstraction "beauty," trail off toward the ideal. Images such as these give visible form to the principles governing myth, metaphor, and words of double entendre, leading the mind, through oscillations, away from corporeal reality toward the abstract. In them, furthermore, Hardy pictorializes the structure and processes of Tess's universe, divided into substance, on the one hand, and shadow—the realm of idea—on the other, with the interpreting mind effecting transactions between them.

The activities occupying this interpreter are reduction and sublimation, two important phases of alchemy. He reduces the earthy forms of the empirical realm to shadows, then sublimes them in the ideal to saints or court beauties. Reduction of the concrete proceeds in the novel's verbal images: in Tringham's language describing the d'Urberville nose and chin, "a little debased'" in Durbeyfield, or the family "'declined'" and extinct in the male line, "'that is, gone down—gone under'" (6-7); in Tess's figure of speech, "'and we are all gone to nothing'" (159); in the reduction of the newlyweds to the "ashes of their former fires" (198); in the figure of Angel, "so reduced . . . from its former contours from worry and the bad season" (304); in his mother's more subtle reduction of Tess to "'a mere child of the soil'" (305)—all hand in glove with a systematic rhetorical reduction of Tess. The narrator's similes reduce Tess in size, to a fly (89); in kind, to a "fascinated bird" (104) or a cat (104); and in substance, comparing her to "a soul at large" (110). Long before Tess has been physically obliterated, rhetoric has reduced her to nothing in two easy steps: "Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly" (89). Tess diminishes to a fly, and then, as a thing of no consequence, to nothing. Her fate reechoes in the insect world when "Gnats, knowing nothing of their brief glorification, wandered across the shimmer of this pathway, irradiated as if they bore fire within them, then

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passed out of its line, and were quite extinct” (169). Conversely, by aggrandizement, rhetoric and imagination (with a little help from drink) sublime the furniture at Rolliver’s; death sublimes the words of the stranger for Angel; the narrator sublimes the country dancers, while his characters seem all too ready to do the same for themselves: “They were as sublime as the moon and stars above them, and the moon and stars were as ardent as they“ (55).

Visual and verbal images, spontaneously born in response to the moment, introduce a fresh, recreative force into what we must call the novel’s empirical reality. Each of these images represents an act of imagination by the narrator or his characters and not by their forebears. Inserted as they are into the largely factual exposition, these moments of fancy seem no more than attractive digressions, lending a poetic delicacy or imaginative “atmosphere” to an otherwise realistic account of rural England. Still, by the novel’s end, such imaginings have realized themselves. They have done so by a subtle process of repeated incursions into the empirical order of things, each time intruding a second dimension of reality, that of idea, which builds by slow accretions and by transferring vitalities from one realm to another, from the phenomenal to the ideal, and between subdivisions of the phenomenal. While the examples cited above hint at the transfiguring powers of the visual and rhetorical figure, the same examples illustrate the limitations of the imaginative: the impossibility of creating a truly original second reality that does not dissipate and lead off toward abstraction. The transformation of the country dance in particular demonstrates the limitation imposed upon the would-be renovator and his rhetoric. The narrator can create only a mirror image of the world he knows and only out of the language of his world, in this case the language of mythology, the product of a culture he cannot escape. Even little Abraham, when he changes trees into tigers or giants’ heads (24), can only substitute in the second realm objects from the known universe. Rolliver’s patrons can glorify only the fixtures of this world and only in the terms of this world. Visual and verbal images, dependent upon known phenomena, cannot create a wholly unique second reality; they can only rearrange already existing elements.

Reorganization, then, constitutes the primary activity of the novel’s imaginative force. If the imagination is confined to a reshuffling of old matter, the verbal creator enjoys special prerogatives not tendered to manipulators of the material universe, chiefly the

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power to transgress with ease the boundaries dividing the three traditional kingdoms of nature—animal, vegetable, and mineral—and in particular the barrier separating the organic from the inorganic. Hardy’s notes find him contemplating the impassability of this barricade:

The organic & the inorganic worlds. The passage from the mineral world to the plant or animal world is hermetically sealed on the mineral side. This inorganic world is staked off from the living world by barriers which have never yet been crossed from within. No change of substance, no modification of environment, no chemistry, no electricity, nor any form of energy, nor any evolution, can endow any single atom of the mineral world with the attribute of life. Only by the bending down into this dead world of some living form can these dead atoms be gifted with the properties of vitality, without this preliminary contact with life they remain fixed in the inorganic sphere for ever. . . . If there is one thing in Nature more worth pondering for its strangeness it is the spectacle of this vast helpless world of the dead cut off from the living by the law of Biogenesis, & denied forever the possibility of resurrection within itself. 33

In a literary universe, the pathetic fallacy can readily enliven this “dead world.” In Tess, Hardy employs sophisticated variations of the pathetic fallacy, as his images, working below the level of discourse, effect gradual permutations in nature that lead in due course to the dissolution of Tess and the inversions noted in the novel’s culmination.

Tess is the living form selected to be bent down to the earth for its vitalization as Hardy literally rearranges the elements—plant, animal, and mineral—by a series of comparisons that gradually reduce Tess and diffuse her vitality into the other realms of nature. The process begins imperceptibly, with innocent comparisons of her to insects and animals—a fly, a bird, or a cat—and to plants—to a “sapling” (109), a plant flinching under the burning sun of Angel’s ardent (144), or a “belated seedling” of the d’Urbervilles (195). Reduction proceeds toward the inorganic, diminishing this plant and her sun to the “ashes of their former fires” and toward the nebulosity of gases by comparison to a “soul at large,” achieving at length a full dissociation of Tess from her body, which she allows to “drift like a corpse upon the current,” and climaxing in her complete disappearance and replacement by the black flag. As Tess dwindles to nothing, her vitality returns to the soil, a process heralded by the narrator’s meditation upon the field hands:

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"a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it" (74). This loss of distinguishing identity and assimilation into the landscape then recurs with awesome literalness in the harsh season at the turnip farm. There Tess diminishes to a nonentity while the narrator simultaneously reinvests her animus in the inorganic world. At her approach, Tess is psychologically "obliterating her identity" (230); next, she is literally effaced as she snips off her brows (233), then figuratively "effaced," cut off from two families, "virtually non-existent" (245); and meanwhile blended into the landscape, "a thing scarcely percipient, almost inorganic" (234). Inorganic nature, in turn, mirrors back Tess's effacement, having acquired in the process something of a visage of its own:

the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone.

(237)

At the same time, the "air afflicted to pallor" (241) also gains a little physiognomy. Meanwhile, vegetable begins to shift into animal: "the few lonely trees and thorns of the hedgerows appeared as if they had put off a vegetable for an animal integument" (239). In the decidedly inorganic world of Flintcombe-Ash, with its flints, its "hardened" daylight (242), coppery sunlight (276), and "glass splinters" of rain (238), living things are hardened to deadness. Angel's words harden to "crystallized phrases," which, dropping into the "sea" of Alec's enthusiasm, "served to chill its effervescence to stagnation" (269), while dead things come to life, as the inorganic storm attains a human deliberation (239), and invisible things materialize: "Cobwebs revealed their presence on shed and walls where none had ever been observed till brought out into visibility by the crystallizing atmosphere" (239–40). Much earlier, man and vegetable had been intermixed in that "vegeto-human pollen" out of which the narrator had inverted matter and emotion in an important paradigm of this reorganization. The next major interchange occurs on Tess's wedding night, when an almost palpable anguish begins to infuse animal energies into sentient objects, the latter, by their very indifference, displaying an irritating vitality of a distinctly human kind: "The fire in the grate looked

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impish. . . . The fender grinned idly, as if it did not care" (190). As tragedy drains life from Tess, a living spirit begins to flicker in a hitherto lifeless environment.

The novel's creative energies, concentrated in its figures of speech, serve a process of breaking down the divisions between the major realms of nature and shifting vitalities from one realm to another. The linguistic equivalent of this process consists of breaking down the distinctions between the phenomenal and intelligible realms of reality by comparable transgressions in the use of rhetorical figures. The narrator, exchanging man and vegetable or matter and emotion, or exchanging Tess and the field with his brilliant play on "desolate drab," also changes the phenomenal for the intelligible by the use of metaphor. Metaphor, used infrequently in Tess, represents a strong impulsive force for change, and its significance is perhaps best appreciated in the context of Hardy's use of the simile.

Hardy works predominantly with similes, which he clusters around moments of fantasizing or intense emotion. While similes appear to describe the process taking place, they may also be recognized as generated by the participants—by the drinkers, for example, aggrandizing their surroundings, or the laborers, imagining themselves intermingled with nature:

the erratic motions seemed an inherent part of the irradiation, and the fumes of their breathing a component of the night's mist; and the spirit of the scene, and of the moonlight, and of Nature, seemed harmoniously to mingle with the spirit of wine.

(58)

Passion spawns a complex of similes, as Tess in the garden listens to Angel's music:

she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears to her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, the dampness of the garden the weeping of the garden's sensibilities . . . the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound.

(104)

Both passages show transformations of reality taking place within the imagination, but confined to the imagination, the repeated "seemed" insisting upon the purely mental and illusory nature of such transformations. Within these confines, however, the permutations of nature slowly advance, intermingling the gaseous

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spirits of this world with those of the other world, or the sensuality of the vegetable kingdom with the sensibilities of the human heart. In these passages, moreover, Hardy works with the most finely attenuated substances of the phenomenal world, linking them to equally ephemeral referents in the ideational, playing, as it were, at the very border of the material world. Across this border a series of transactions takes place from the phenomenal to the intelligible through the simile, as the interpreting minds repeatedly refer phenomena to their counterparts in the ideal. “Harmonies” transfer to “breezes,” “pollen” to “music notes,” “dampness” to “weeping,” or “fumes” of breathing to the “night’s mist.” By a continuing process of such references, a second dimension of reality gradually amasses, or fills, if you will, made of the stuff of emotion and imagination: irradiation, spirit of the scene, musical notes, weeping. If in time ideas will realize themselves, then these are the ingredients of the next world to come, and they are all as airy and insubstantial as possible.

Elsewhere, the simile allows a wholesale investment of personality to transfer unnoticed across the border between the realms of matter and mind: “The evening sun was now ugly to her, like a great inflamed wound in the sky” (114); “The pollard willows, tortured out of their natural shape by incessant choppings, [became] spiny-haired monsters” (150). Abraham, “still mentally in the other world” (24), injects giants and tigers, while Tess, in reverie, half witnesses, half participates in the infusion of persona into that other world:

The mute procession past her shoulders of trees and hedges became attached to fantastic scenes outside reality, and the occasional heave of the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, conterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time.

(26)

The intoxicated farmhands breathe a substantial amount of spirit—the spirit of the scene, the spirit of nature—into their surroundings, while a more potent elixir, love, inspires its own animation of the landscape: “It was a typical summer evening in June, the atmosphere being so transmissive that inanimate objects seemed endowed with two or three senses, if not five” (103).

Were these episodes to be spatialized, one would find the participants on a borderline, at Hardy’s “interspace,” a locus halfway between fantasy and reality, which they attain through drink,

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drowsiness, or the stimulus of emotion. Or one would find the narrator also on a border, neither wholly inside nor outside a character’s mind, but somewhere between, mediating between a character’s impressions and a factual, external world. Man’s mind, located at the intersection of the phenomenal and the intelligible, serves as the arbiter and bridge between the two, but the mind is also the barrier that distinguishes fact from fancy and maintains their separation. More than once the novel insists upon the preservation of this barrier, as when the narrator points out Tess committing the pathetic fallacy (72), and later, when Tess corrects her own rhetoric, saying, “The trees have inquisitive eyes, haven’t they?—that is, seem as if they had” (105). This strict division cannot be maintained in the ubiquitous traditional vocabulary, where component words are so heavily freighted with imaginative values that the margins between the factual and the imaginary have been eroded. Accordingly, they exert a compulsive force. In contrast, the novel’s fresh, creative enterprise has been concentrated primarily in similes, whose structure upholds the distinction, even in the most extravagant fantasizing, and so sustains the impression that the factual is always winnowed from the illusory. Still, the reader has it on good authority that in this world seeming is tantamount to being: “for the world is only a psychological phenomenon and what they seemed they were” (72). Despite the reader’s illusion that he is at all times in touch with a factual, objective reality, he receives it from a narrator whose recital is continually tempered and mutated by the psychic operations of his characters, to which he periodically adds impressions distinctively his own, foremost among them the Arcadian imagery transfiguring the country dance, imagery that the novel makes plain lies beyond Tess’s knowledge. If what things seem they are, then that supposedly factual reality comes to the reader through transmitters to whom it repeatedly seems something other than it is. And, by the novel’s end, many things that at first only seemed to be have, in a sense, come to be. Something, therefore, must happen to change seeming into being, and that something must happen rhetorically to violate the integrity of the simile, whose nature it is to differentiate between the realms of things as they are and things as they seem.

In a verbal universe, the structure of reality is intimately bound up with the structure of the simile. The simile, embracing but separating empirical reality on the one hand and idea on the other,
is the mental analogue of the bifold universe, a rhetorical micro-cosm and a paradigm of universal stability. This stability is fragile, however. Between empirical fact and the ideas of the mind are only those minimal words of connection, “seems like,” “as if,” words that are, at the same time, separations. Even when “the wind became the sigh,” the word “became” represents that last tenuous moment of separation before the implicit being of metaphor replaces the factual with the imaginary and inverts the order of things. This construct appears to be endemic to Hardy’s mind, so that, whether intentionally or unconsciously, he pictorializes both his biform universe and the simile itself when he invests the earth and sky with faces:

So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface like flies.

(237–38)

Thus visualized, the universe appears in two equal and opposite halves, each holding a mirror to the other, with man and his mind alone positioned between them. The shape of the simile can also be discerned here, with the phenomenal and the ideational divided, yet engaged in a reciprocal reflection of one another, with only those miniscule words of connection and separation standing between them “like flies.” Remove those inconsequential “flies,” blend those frail beings back into the landscape, and the order of the two realms begins to shift.

So too do personification and metaphor remove the divisions and obliterate the distinctions—a dangerous business in a system where to tinker with the word is to tinker with the universal machinery. A breakdown of the barriers begins most conspicuously with the narrator’s metaphor of the bacchanalia. Soon after that, the drama of Pan and Syrinx, already reviving in Alec and Tess, begins its reenactment in earnest, with Alec in hot, relentless pursuit, and Tess escaping by a rhetorical metamorphosis into the subhuman forms of nature. 34 Again the narrator indulges, now in personification, as he self-consciously transforms the sun into “a beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature” (73). And again his words take shape with the forthcoming Angel, Tess’s “Apollo,” as the narrator calls him (319), whose correspondences to the sun have come to the attention of Ensticce, while others, such as Tanner, see
Tess’s role as that of a worshipper being made a sacrifice to the sun on his altar at Stonehenge. Metaphor abolishes the barriers between the separate natures of Tess and Angel, effecting the “gravitation of two into one,” and changing “the pivot of the universe” for these two natures. Out of this involution, personification invigorates the inorganic as Angel, having received Tess’s nature into himself, turns round and reinvests that nature into the previously lifeless dairy house:

The aged and lichen[g]ed brick gables breathed forth “Stay!” The windows smiled, the door coaxed and beckoned, the creeper blushed confederacy. A personality within it was so far-reaching in her influence as to spread into and make the bricks, mortar, and whole overhanging sky throb with a burning sensibility. Whose was this mighty personality? A milkmaid’s.

(129–30)

Personification again intrudes during the wedding night, a central intersection where breakdowns in human relations reverberate in breakdowns of rhetorical structures. Intense feelings intermingle; so do minds, making it more difficult than usual to determine if it is Tess’s thoughts or the narrator’s or Angel’s that have transfigured inanimate objects:

But the complexion even of external things seemed to suffer transmutation as her announcement progressed. The fire in the grate looked impish... The fender grinned idly, as if it did not care. ... All material objects around announced their irresponsibility with terrible iteration. And yet nothing had changed since the moments when he had been kissing her; or rather, nothing in the substance of things. But the essence of things had changed.

(190–91)

Changes in essence have their parallels in changes of rhetoric, as the prevailing similes give way to full personification. Changed essence soon manifests itself: “The night came in and took up its place there unconcerned and indifferent; the night which had already swallowed up his happiness, and was now digesting it listlessly” (197). It is impossible to identify the creator of this monster. Is it Angel’s or the narrator’s image? On the wedding night the divisions between minds seem to have broken down. With the entrance of “night” the divisions between the phenomenal and the ideational break down. Anguish, together with an intermixture of minds, exchanges essence and substance, transfers living spirit to inorganic objects, and draws down from the realm of idea the

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accumulated animus, now embodied in a numinous “night,” and, as a corollary, accelerates the transmutations in nature that follow. Angel grows increasingly like a disembodied spirit, arriving back at Emminster “like a ghost” (217), his mood “transmuted . . . into a dogged indifference till at length he fancied he was looking on his own existence with the passive interest of an outsider” (217), his reduction continuing until he is a wraithlike form returned from Brazil. The transference of Tess into the landscape reaches its crescendo at Flintcombe-Ash. Transfigurations of the material world, begun imperceptibly in the mind, suggest themselves in similes, then express themselves most directly in metaphor and personification, and, instead of remaining mere idle figures of speech, reorganize reality to work their own realization.

Taken together, Hardy’s rhetorical figures function as little mirrors into which one may peer to observe more closely the novel’s imaginative thrust. One traces, first, a consistent diminution or dissolution of the palpable. The sun grows more abstract when compared to a “wound”; the air, already intangible, grows still more so when it suggests “an achromatic chaos of things” (241). Most of these figures contribute to the progressive disintegration of Tess, while Angel all but dissolves into a “ghost” and the revelers sublime into gases. The simile itself presses toward abstraction. With few exceptions, similes in the first six Phases offer up a definite entity, however flimsy, for comparison to a counterpart in the ideal. By the novel’s end, however, abstractions are compared to even greater abstractions: “The gloomy intervening time seemed to sink into chaos, over which the present and prior times closed as if it had never been” (323); “the night grew dark as a cave” (325). To peer into these little mirrors for a glimpse of the other world is to look into a black hole. A complementary activity, also performed in rhetorical figures, enlarges the commonplace and vitalizes the inanimate. An injection of alcohol aggrandizes the rustic dancers, sanctifies the laborers, beautifies the tawdry furnishings of reality. Anguish animates the impish fire and grinning fender, the furtive dawn and voracious night. An infusion of mist and narrative enthusiasm invests the sun with an active, masculine identity. Love breathes romantic life into an old, uninteresting dairy house. While the narrative alchemy reduces and dehumanizes Tess, divesting her of her features, it simultaneously endows the landscape with a face and invigorates the inanimate kingdom of nature. By recurring impressions and ventures of the

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imagination, *Tess’s* governing mind reduces, sublimes, and ultimately transubstantiates its world.

Reduction of *Tess* reaches its penultimate in the compression of her language to the monosyllable of nothing: “O-O-O!” (314–15), at which point the novel seems to achieve a kind of liberation. As *Tess* releases herself from d’Urberville and breaks through social and moral barriers, she attains a liberation from her tragic life already prefigured in the dissociation of her psyche from her body. The novel parallels this release as it breaks out of its customary habit of fixing its characters rigidly in time and space with each new chapter. The action moves relatively unhampered across the chapters of Phase the Seventh as Angel and *Tess* wander through vast, open spaces in a less carefully defined time for a period of free floating before the forces of established order reexert their pressures and claims. In this Phase, the narrative as a whole has attained a kind of interspace between an old order, which has by now been largely overturned, and a new, which promises to reform around Angel and ’Liza-Lu. If this history will repeat itself, there is evidence that it will do so without the strictures of a theological scenario and its coercive vocabulary, if only because *Tess* has so thoroughly satisfied the old words by fulfilling them, a fulfillment helped along, of course, by the comparison of the mourners to Giotto’s *Two Apostles* (329), and by the implications of Stonehenge.

As to the nature of the new order, we have observed it in the making. By repeated excursions into the imaginary, an alter-reality has been forming out of the stuff of emotion and sentiment, of self-aggrandizement, by exaltation of the commonplace—the beatified laborers and tender milkmaids—and by repeated commission of the pathetic fallacy. This other world grows gradually more numinous as the novel progresses, filling with the “spirit of Nature,” the soul sighing in the wind, a visaged earth and sky, grinning fenders, a beaming sun, and a ruminating night, until the same novel that once fastidiously pointed out the pathetic fallacy has, by its end, invested the very void with a persona: “All around was open loneliness and black solitude” (325). A student of *The Prelude*, listening intently to this language, should hear the echo of a familiar voice or glimpse the shadow of a parody, begun at least in the country dance, the glorification of the rustics, and the sublimation that occurs on the walk homeward. In short, the new order is distinctly Wordsworthian.36 Nor does it seem by chance that the
man for the New Age, Angel, shows an uncanny likeness to Wordsworth. As with Wordsworth, Angel eschews a Cambridge education in favor of the rural life whose charms he sentimentalizes but also patronizes. Like Wordsworth, Angel finds that early “association with country solitudes had bred in him an unconquerable, and almost unreasonable, aversion to modern town life” (99), finds orthodox religion uncongenial, and, preferring “sermons in stones to sermons in churches” (120), adopts instead his own mixture of Christianity, idealism, and neo-pantheism. Angel, along with Wordsworth, finds it easier to love from afar an idealized humanity in the abstract than a flawed human being, close at hand, in the flesh. And, with a delightful aptness, Angel at Talbothays parodies Wordsworth’s self-conscious sublimity by living above it all, in the attic above the loft, producing his harmonies and idealizing milkmaids. Hardy, who noted impartially both Wordsworth’s pompousness and his virtues, asserted that if a new “golden age” of more honest values, of true democracy, and of greater refinement in the humble and wealthy alike should “dawn upon the nations, then Wordsworth will be recognized as the prophet & apostle of the world’s rejuvenescence.” Whether Tess’s world will be so fully reformed is a matter of some doubt. Still, it has undergone a rejuvenation and a form of refinement. The novel’s alchemy has produced what alchemy should: gold—the hint of a new golden age about to begin with the refined natures of Angel and ’Liza-Lu, this gold having been brought forth from the lead-encased d’Urberville ancestry in the Durbeyfield girls and purified by Tess’s sacrificial death. Meanwhile, no small irony rewards the demystified narrator, whose philosophical posture has rejected Romanticism as flatly as it has theology. Quite unknowingly he has laboriously overturned the universe with his rhetoric, element by element, almost molecule by molecule, dismantling a theologically dominated world only to turn up a Romantic one on the other side.

Hardy, of course, offers many angles from which to assess the novel’s overall statement, and it would be a mistake to overemphasize the importance of this submerged rhetorical process. When considering the novel’s covert shaping of reality, we are best served, in my opinion, by regarding it in the broader light of Hardy’s philosophical vision, which emerges more definitively in The Dynasts. There, J. O. Bailey sees the influence of von Hartmann’s philosophy, which posited in the universe a permeating and ma-

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nipulating mind, yet one lacking the consciousness of a human mind or an anthropomorphic deity. History and evolution consist of this Unconscious striving to realize itself by coming to full consciousness. In *Tess*, the cultural consciousness, transcending time and space and working to bring its ideas to fruition, performs a comparable function. History in *Tess* consists of bringing a theological epoch to its fulfillment and moving on toward its chronological successor, the Romantic Age. *Tess*’s imaginative process also shows traces of Hardy’s evolutionary meliorism, his theory that man, consciously suffering, compassionating, exhibiting noble or humane behavior, modifies the Unconscious by teaching it what it means to be conscious, so that in time the universal mind acquires the requisite sympathy to reform its indifferent, mechanical ways. In *Tess*, a coalition of minds invests human consciousness, and especially human suffering, into an initially lifeless nature, and succeeds in activating it with an increasingly discernible persona. A noticeably more conscious universe, emergent at the novel’s end, suggests a slightly more sympathetic one, an improved but far from perfected model, one whose prophet might well be styled after Wordsworth.

Tess is the novel’s chosen sacrifice, offered up to vitalize the run-down mechanism of the universe. She also proves well suited to instruct a still manifestly pitiless world on the nature of injustice, tenderness, and selfless devotion. When her death is assessed in the light of the novel’s subtler ontology, its tragic character may be somewhat alleviated by a hopeful observation. If the novel bends its efforts to erase Tess from its own realm of matter, it also concludes by subliming her into an abstraction, an idea displaced by the black flag, and, in that sublimation, shifting her into the alternate dimension of mind. The locus of this dimension rests ultimately in the cultural consciousness where legends show a remarkable durability. There—or rather, here, with us—Tess attains a kind of immortality, the only kind Hardy thought allowable on a blighted star.

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FOOTNOTES


2 See, for example, Andrew Enstice, *Thomas Hardy: Landscapes of the Mind*

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(London: Macmillan, 1979), 130, on the forces bringing Tess down, which include “ideas implanted in Tess” and “the texts of Old Clare’s followers.”


5 This parallel has been noted by Dorothy Van Ghent in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 195–209, esp. 198.


7 “Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles.*”


10 On the demystified narrator, see Miller, “Fiction and Repetition,” 62–64, 68.

11 Miller, “Fiction and Repetition,” 62.


15 Lennart A. Björk, ed., *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, Gothenburg Studies in English 29 (Göteborg, Sweden, 1974), 1:153, taken from “Mr. Justice Fry, quot. in *Spectator* 20 May ‘82”. “Dr. Weismann (Studies in the theory of Descent) goes so far as to say that the whole mechanism of the universe may well be conceived as having an interior or mental aspect corresponding to its external & self-complete framework. . . . Unless you assume the ultimate atom or molecule to have some inner qualities analogous to those we call mental—qualities such as the late Prof. Clifford used to speak of as those of mind-stuff—there is no explaining how the mental universe is developed out of the physical.” See also the following note on 1:153.

16 *Literary Notes*, 1:152–53. In the original the last sentence has been enclosed in brackets, which I have removed to avoid suggesting that these are my words.

17 “Fiction and Repetition,” 51.


20 *Tess*, 108, 195; Miller, “Fiction and Repetition,” 59, discusses the images of repeated forms.

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22 21; Kelleher also cites this passage, although the point he illustrates is slightly different from mine, for which the transformation in metallic images is especially apt.
23 Miller discusses the inadequacy of prescribed legendary models to fit the realities of Tess (“Fiction and Repetition,” 62–64).
24 Literary Notes 1:61.
27 Enstice, 127.
28 The expectation that murdering Alec will earn her Angel’s benediction (318) along with the calm expectation of her approaching death is rational in the mentality of the martyr.
29 Distance and Desire, 103. See also his discussion of the past imposing itself upon the present, 98–102.
30 Distance and Desire, 105.
31 Landscapes of the Mind, 122 ff. See also Miller, “Fiction and Repetition,” 59; Distance and Desire, 80–82. See also Lucille Herbert, “Hardy’s Views in Tess of the d’Urbervilles,” ELH 37 (1970), 79 ff. on moralized landscapes and topographical metaphors.
32 Van Ghent, 195–209; Miller, Distance and Desire, 104; “Fiction and Repetition,” 47.
33 Literary Notes 1:159. Entry refers to “Drummond’s ‘Natural Law of the Spiritual World.’”
34 J. T. Laird observes the debt to Ovid’s Metamorphoses in these images in The Shaping of Tess (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 56–57.
35 Enstice, 127; Tanner, 194. Miller interprets this personification of the sun as prefiguring the motif of pagan sacrifice at the end (“Fiction and Repetition,” 54–55).
37 Tess, 98; see The Prelude, 7.52–57 on Cambridge dropouts. On Wordsworth’s idealization of the pastoral, see book 8 passim.
38 See Prelude 7.722–33 on Wordsworth’s response to London.
39 See Prelude 2.376, 405–30 on receiving religious instruction from nature and things natural.
40 Among the commentaries on Angel’s defects, Bruce Hugman’s anatomy nicely illuminates those humorless, priggish features so well known to Wordsworth’s critics (Hardy: Tess of the d’Urbervilles [London: Edward Arnold, 1970], section 5, 29–34, esp. 29–31). On Wordsworth, see Jones, passim.
41 I refer to Wordsworth’s famous posture of elevation with its attendant language of heights, exaltation, and particularly “loftiness,” his favorite. See Prelude 1.143; 2.463; 7.496; 5.223–41.
42 Literary Notes 1:130.
43 Thomas Hardy and the Cosmic Mind, 14–15.
44 Bailey, 155–60.