can gain a provocative perspective on our own problems. Let us emulate his courage in holding fast to what is good. Let us borrow his refreshing boldness, along with his scorn of mere novelty; let us share his readiness to adjust education to the known needs of an age. Above all, let us talk more often among ourselves about what concerns us so closely.

**Moral Perspective in**

**Tess of the D’Urbervilles**

**ROBERT C. SCHWEIK**

The "very meaning" of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, J. O. Bailey has recently observed, is that "Tess, though impure in act, was a pure woman in the tendencies of her mind and heart." Equally explicit generalizations about the ethical implications of the novel have been expressed by earlier commentators—that Hardy’s defense of Tess was a "frank appeal to the law of nature," for example, or that Hardy was preaching a "superior moral law" through the mouth of the repentant Angel Clare. To find language in *Tess* which seems to support some general moral argument is certainly not difficult, for although Hardy insisted that the novel was an "impression," scattered through it are passages which can be read almost as though they were abstract propositions in ethics. In fact, some recent critics like Dorothy Van Ghent and G. D. Klingopulos have concluded that is exactly what such passages often are—abstract "bits of philosophic adhesive tape" loosely attached to the surface of the novel and neither integral with its structure nor clearly related to the impression it renders. But it is as unnecessary, I think, to conclude that many passages in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* are structural excrescences as it is mistaken to assume that one or another of them epitomizes Hardy’s defense of Tess.

Consider, for example, a group of comments which come near the conclusion of the novel, when Angel Clare begins to question the basis for his judgment of Tess:

> Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? (432)

An answer to Clare’s question follows at once—or, rather, a series of answers, and each from a different point of view. Angel Clare himself sees moral reality in the private history of Tess’s mind and answers his own question by concluding that the “beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, 

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3All quotations are from *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, ed. Albert J. Guerard (New York, 1950), and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

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but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed.” Clare’s answer has been variously interpreted as a successful—or clumsy and irrelevant—attempt by Hardy to supply a “philosophical” defense of Tess’s purity, but the context in which it appears suggests that it serves a quite different purpose. After coming to his own conclusion, Clare then talks with a stranger who changes the terms and reduces the proportions of the problem by emphasizing Tess’s future rather than her past and by considering the question of her moral character in relation to the differences in social norms throughout the world. The stranger sees the problem as if at a greater distance; from his more inclusive point of view the details which trouble Clare appear correspondingly less important, and he subjects Tess’s moral worth to a different kind of “appraise-

ment”:

The stranger had sojourned in many more lands and among many more peoples than Angel; to his cosmopolitan mind such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale and mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve. He viewed that matter in a quite different light from Angel; thought that what Tess had been was of no importance beside what she could be, and plainly told Clare that he was wrong in coming away from her. (433)

Then, as Angel Clare continues to reason about the answer to his question, Hardy injects an authorial comment which further minimizes the problem by describing Clare’s situation as if from a still more inclusive point of view:

But the reasoning is somewhat musty; lovers and husbands have gone over the ground before to-day. 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; the harshness of the position towards the temperament, the means towards the aims, of to-day towards yester-
day, of hereafter towards to-day. (435)

In effect, the comments which follow Clare’s question function as devices of perspective: they present the same situation from different points of view, and each new viewpoint reveals a world of different dimensions and different moral implications. Many passages scattered throughout Tess of the D’Urbervilles have a similar effect; they call attention to the moral implications of Tess’s seduction as it appears in perspectives which emphasize the importance of contrasting aspects of reality—the external world of biological forces and the internal world of subjective consciousness. Hardy sometimes describes Tess as if at an immense distance, from which she appears reduced to the size of “a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly”; in other places in the novel he implies a correspondingly distant moral point of view, from which Tess’s seduction appears to be no more than a minute and inconsequential event in a vast world of irresistible biological forces. After her seduction, Tess herself considers the consequences of her violation in terms which reduce the problem to a question of biological recovery: “Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? she would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil bygones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone” (126). During Tess’s stay at Talbothays, Hardy traces the operation of that recuperative power as it works on her. Even earlier there are moments when a beneficent sun seems to shine on Tess like a “golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed God-like creature, gazing down in the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming
with interest for him" (109), and times when she feels moved by an “invincible instinct toward self-delight” (127). After her journey to Talbothays, what Hardy describes as Tess’s “passing corporeal blight” gradually succumbs to a simple biological urge for pleasure; he observes that Tess has been mastered by the “irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life from the meanest to the highest” (134), and when she finally consents to marry Angel Clare, Hardy pointedly invites the reader to see the event in a perspective which diminishes to insignificance all but the irresistible biological forces which dominate the universe:

She might as well have agreed at first. The “appetite for joy” which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed, was not to be controlled by vague lucubrations over the social rubric. (244)

In this last comment, and from time to time elsewhere in the novel, Hardy exploits a viewpoint which takes in “all creation” in order to minimize the importance of the social code which condemns Tess. The obvious biological facts within the world of nature are treated as though they were the only apparent realities, and social distinctions are described as if they were purely arbitrary constructs without any visible basis in actuality. When, for example, Tess thinks that her social guilt is reflected in nature, Hardy calls this a “sorry and mistaken creation of Tess’s fancy” and remarks that such notions of guilt are “out of harmony with the actual world” and imply a “distinction where there was no difference” (108). Again, when Tess finds a flock of wounded and dying pheasants, the obvious reality of their physical pain reminds her that the social code has no corresponding basis in reality:

“Poor darlings—to suppose myself the most miserable being on earth in the sight o’ such misery as yours!” she exclaimed, her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly. “And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me.” She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature. (355)

There are passages in Tess, then, which in effect invite the reader to see Tess’s seduction as if from a viewpoint which renders visible only a world of biological realities—organic soundness, physical pain, the universal instinct to seek pleasure. In this perspective Tess’s seduction appears to be a “passing corporeal blight” that is quickly overcome by the instinct for pleasure which dominates all living things, and any other significance which society attaches to her past seems merely arbitrary. But the extreme naturalism implicit in such passages is elsewhere countered by an equally extreme idealism implicit in others. If Hardy sometimes pictures Tess as though she were only a minute and inconsequential organism caught up in a vast world of natural forces, he elsewhere reverses the image so that the whole world appears to be a part of Tess.

The shift from one image of reality to another can occur with startling abruptness; Hardy’s remark that Tess’s fancied guilt is “out of harmony with the actual world” stands only one paragraph from a comment with precisely the opposite implications: “At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather, they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were” (108). Such an inversion of reality implies a corresponding inversion of proportion;
reduced to a “psychological phenomenon,” the world of external forces seems to shrink in significance while Tess, on the other hand, acquires a special importance and magnitude when reality is equated with her subjective experience:

Many besides Angel have learnt that the magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements but as to their subjective experiences. . . . Tess was no insignificant creature to toy with and dismiss; but a woman living her precious life—a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself. Upon her sensations the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born. (198-199)

Consistent with the emphasis which such passages place on the reality of subjective consciousness are other comments which serve as invitations to the reader to consider Tess’s character not in terms of external facts but in a perspective which focuses attention on psychological realities like “will,” “intention,” and mental “tendency.” When, for example, Tess’s confession surprises Angel Clare “back to his early teachings,” Hardy observes:

No prophet had told him, and he was not prophet enough to tell himself, that essentially this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement, but by tendency. (338)

Later, Tess complains of Angel’s treatment of her on the same grounds—that hers were “not sins of intention, but of inadvertence” (545)—and Angel Clare finally comes to take the same point of view when he concludes that Tess should be judged “constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed” (473).

In short, what Hardy provides in Tess of the D’Urbervilles is not an answer to Clare’s question but answers which imply limited views and conflicting assumptions about moral reality. Furthermore, those assumptions are themselves qualified (if not contradicted) by other elements in the novel. What the action of Tess suggests—that Alec D’Urberville can be mastered by an “instinct towards self delight” as well as his victim—is made explicit in Hardy’s comments to the effect that nature has no “holy plan” (24), that nature’s law is “cruel” (187), and that natural forces work indifferently at cross purposes, the “inherent will to enjoy” being opposed by the “circumstantial will against enjoyment” (365). An image which suggests the beneficent recuperative power of nature—a “God-like” sun gazing down “upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him”—will elsewhere be countered by an even more elaborate image suggesting nature’s indiscriminate working (136), and the frequency with which Tess’s surroundings signify their moral irresponsibility lends support to her complaint that “the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike” (162).

Similarly, Hardy treats Tess’s subjective consciousness as if it were as grim and morally irresponsible as the world of nature. The “structure of sensations” that is reality for Tess is a jumble of confused moral attitudes, and within it her subjective sense of guilt takes on a compelling reality which at times completely overshadows the purity of her intentions. Although she is hardly responsible for the accident which kills the Derbyfield horse, Tess regards herself as a “murderess” after his death (37-38), and the sense of moral responsibility which troubles her after the accident and prompts her expiatory trip to the Stoke-D’Urberville mansion prefigures the more profound sense of guilt...
which from time to time returns to torture her after her seduction. Tess comes to think of herself as a "figure of Guilt intruding in the haunts of innocence" (108), and after meeting Clare, she feels that she is "not worthy of him" (250), that she should "confess" her sin to him, and that she should be punished for her "wickedness" (269). Paradoxically, if within her own mind Tess is innocent, she is also most guilty there; for what Hardy reveals of Tess's "mental tendency" is conflicting and ambiguous, and one important aspect of it is suggested by her repeated impulse to punish herself. It is this tendency which prompts Tess to make the wedding night confession which precipitates her final tragedy; Tess feels that she "deserved worse" than the other milkmaids whom Clare had rejected, and she determines, because it was "wicked of her to take all without paying," that she will "pay to the uttermost farthing" (284). When we are attentive, then, to what Hardy reveals about Tess's "aims and impulses" we are brought into contact with something more complex than simple purity—and in particular with what Evelyn Hardy has described as Tess's "insidious need to immolate herself":

Tess, for all her simplicity, is a subtly-drawn character with contradictory traits. Her simplicity and purity are adulterated with a strain likely to bring about her downfall. In whatever circumstances attend her—the tendency towards martyrdom and self-sacrifice which Hardy has touched on in his feminine characters in previous novels.

Hence, those passages in Tess of the D'Urbervilles which when taken by themselves seem to be little more than abstract moral arguments, appear rather in the context of the novel to provide recognizably limited moral perspectives—partial insights into a much more complex moral reality revealed by the novel as a whole. Of course such limited views have a rhetorical effect—they direct attention to moral dimensions beyond the narrow ethic which condemns Tess. But Hardy seems to have taken pains to avoid imposing some "new ethic without dogma" upon the novel; rather, he leaves the impression that clear-cut answers to moral questions depend on insights which only partly comprehend and more or less distort and simplify reality. What Tess of the D'Urbervilles reveals, then, is not only Hardy's feeling about the shallowness of certain Victorian social mores but his sense of the general limitations of moral vision and the common arbitrariness of moral formulae. Significantly, at the conclusion of the novel, Angel Clare no longer troubles himself with questions about the basis for his judgment of Tess; his response after she reveals that she has murdered Alec is only a "tenderness" which dominates him. That, I suspect, is the final response which Hardy wished to produce in his readers as well. And if Clare's simple and unqualified "tenderness" toward Tess seems clearly more appropriate than his earlier efforts to explain her purity by appealing to "nature" or to "will," this is at least partly because Hardy leaves the impression that such explanations are not only unnecessary but inadequate.

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