

WOMEN AND SEXUALITY
IN THE NOVELS OF
THOMAS HARDY



Rosemarie Morgan

ROUTLEDGE
London and New York

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to Adam, Ruthie, Mimi and Alice, with love

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ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this study I have used the fourteen-volume New Wessex edition of Hardy's novels, published by Macmillan in 1974–6. The exceptions to this are the following:

Far From the Madding Crowd (Macmillan, London, 1949)

The Return of the Native (Macmillan, London, 1943)

Jude the Obscure (Macmillan, London, 1971)

References to these editions are given in parentheses in the text and are abbreviated as follows:

Desperate Remedies DR

Under The Greenwood Tree UGT

A Pair of Blue Eyes PBE

Far From the Madding Crowd FFMC

The Return of the Native RN

Two on a Tower TT

The Mayor of Casterbridge MC

The Woodlanders W

Tess of the d'Urbervilles TD

Jude the Obscure JO

Florence Emily Hardy's *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (Macmillan, London, 1975) is abbreviated to *Life* and references to this text are also given in parentheses.

INTRODUCTION

For Hardy, the physical world holds within its form and structure as many meanings as the imagination of the observer has powers to encompass. The physical expression of things – the way the world looks and is looked upon—yields due significance to the acute observer but immeasurable significance to the imaginative poet whose endeavour, as Hardy saw it, should be to draw out the essential existence of things unseen and render them visible. This is also the part real, part imaginary world of the Wessex novels, a world shaped by an imaginative seeing into nature, human and pastoral, but a world bound no less by hard material fact, life as it is lived.

Life as it is lived by the characters in Hardy's novels, takes material, physical shape, colour, dimension, and form, from sense impressions, sense experience, the life of the senses, and even, on occasion, the sixth senses. Hardy speaks of Tess's existence as a structure of sensations; and indeed sensory experience, for Tess, not only intensifies the physical expression of things so that trees have inquisitive eyes—seeing into her innermost self as Angel cannot—but it also intensifies her mental powers: by fixing her attention on a distant star she moves mind out of body and transcends the material world altogether. Like the poet-Hardy, she moves within and beyond the physical world to discover inner powers, hidden essences and, again like Hardy, she shapes form into feeling, into imaginative vision, into dreams of the new and strange.

Visible essences—Tess's trees with eyes, or her own peony mouth (in form, tone, texture and mobility, the manifest expression of her sexuality)—are, by nature and definition, physical. But it is not so much the visibility as the palpability of female sensations that, with Hardy's women, gives expression to their physicality. Even the so-called 'ethereal' Sue Bridehead has a palpable flesh-and-blood presence: her spirit, Hardy says, could be seen 'trembling through her limbs'. This brings her (descriptively) close to certain other, rather more voluptuous flesh-and-blood presences whom no one except Hardy would think to align (imaginatively) with the superficially sexless Sue: those earthy, hot-blooded milkmaids at Talbothays 'under whose bodices the life throbbed quick and warm'.

I lay stress upon the physicality of Hardy's women for two reasons. The first has to do with the Victorian critics' discomfiture with Hardy's women, which none perceived as an embarrassment with, or fear of, the female body, and which most couched in terms of moral censure. The second has to do with Hardy's less-than-typical Victorian view of female sexuality: his complete lack of puritanical censure, his complete faith in the healthy, life-giving force of free, unrepressed sexual activity, his complete commitment to active, assertive, self-determined women of the kind satirised in the pages of *Punch* as

'masculine', hag-like or gross.¹ In Hardy, the active, assertive woman appears in none of these guises. On the contrary, whether she appears as farmer (Bathsheba), or field-labourer (Tess), or text-illuminator (Sue), or as a highly competent head of household (Paula Power and Ethelberta), she is personable, desirable and by no means mannish or grotesque.

Victorian women were rarely offered fresh active fictions bearing imaginative possibilities of challenge, renewal and change. The tales of discovery, of travel, of work, of exploration, were men's stories where they were not the stories of fallen women—Little Em'ly, Hetty Sorrel. In Hardy's Wessex world the sphere is broadened yet kept well within the range of plausibility and possibility. Women work outside the home in both conventional and unconventional occupations, from teaching to negotiating the price of corn, from serving as barmaids to inaugurating telegraphic systems, from working as milkmaids to organising public readings. Women travel unaccompanied beyond the neighbourhood, embark upon enterprises of their own volition, initiate relationships. In other words, they struggle to shape their own lives with a vigour and energy and resilience that is, to the reader, the more remarkable for the fact that theirs is a struggle against all odds, a struggle in a world that, as Hardy says in *The Return of the Native*, is *not* friendly to women.

In the first instance, I shall argue in this book that Hardy sets at odds those social and literary conventions which mutually reinforced the culturally based induction, in Victorian England, of a sexual 'amnesia' in women. From infancy women were kept in ignorance of their own bodies to experience puberty, defloration and sexual intercourse as *mystery*. Necessarily, the fullness of woman's physical and sexual experience is bound, in Hardy, by his own observations and empathy and, of course, by the censor—dubbed by Hardy, the 'Grundyist'²—but demystification there is, no less. His women toil and labour, for example, and bear the marks of their physical activity; if they weep, their skin blotches, their eyelids puff, redden and ache; if restless and hot in sleep, they sweat; if ill-tempered or depressed, their features slacken; and the physical reality of exhaustion leaves woman as it leaves man—visibly 'jaded' and 'fagged' (*TD*, pp.382, 383). The important point here is that neither the marks of toil nor, indeed, any visible signs of the body's functioning, of physical exertion, of stress or fatigue, renders any of Hardy's women less than worthy, less than noble, less than womanly for their imperfections, or their soiling in the world of work. Hardy begins where the majority of Victorian novelists left off, with 'real', flesh-and-blood women; and he begins with radical verve: the soiled and soiling world of work was not, or so many Victorians argued, a suitable place for noble womankind.

In the same radical spirit, Hardy not only acknowledges, or gives due recognition to female volatile emotions, female sensations, but he also treats them with the same devotion to physical detail as he gives to the male. Hence the potential for the physically active life (as opposed to passive), the active struggle, the active experience, is not reserved exclusively for the hero; and the life of the senses, *women's* senses, does not elude the reader's powers of visualisation and is not, therefore, rendered invisible, or beyond the bounds of common experience.

Hardy's women experience their bodies in ways that drew shudders from his critics, which one of the more outspoken among them, Mrs Oliphant, did not try to hide. Her feelings ran high about *Jude* in particular, whose 'grossness, indecency, and horror' lay,

she felt, at the door of the women: the 'revolting ...disgusting' Arabella, more 'brutal in depravity than anything which the darkest slums could bring forth', and the 'indecent' 'other woman', who 'completes the circle of the unclean' by 'keeping the physical facts' of life 'in constant prominence by denying...them'.³

This brings me back to the second of my reasons for stressing the physicality of Hardy's women. Whereas critics reviled their voluptuousness, Hardy kept firmly to his practice of celebrating the life of the senses and, most important, of presenting the voluptuous woman, the sexy woman, as neither dumb nor loose in morals. To bring moral seriousness and sexiness together in the single female form was not only to fly in the face of current convention, code and belief, it was also subversive. The Victorian conceptual bifurcation of woman (madonna and whore) may seem to the modern mind to be primarily iconographical, but it carried sufficient influence within society to generate its likeness in form: notably, the concept of two types of women, one fit for sex and the other for wife. The social usefulness of this bifurcation in a male-dominated society is that it consolidates division, not only between the sexes—for there is no equivalent among men of the madonna/whore polarisation—but also between women themselves, in that they are divided against their own kind. In every sense of the word they are divided against their own sex. Hardy, then, in presenting Victorians with female models who did not conform to the stereotypes, not only offended against proprieties but also threatened the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of society itself.

It is not simply that moral seriousness and sexiness come together, subversively, in Hardy's more noteworthy heroines, where current belief upheld the view that the latter undoubtedly negated the former, where the prevailing conviction was that the voluptuous woman was by definition morally degenerate. More substantially, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, the fusion of these qualities in the single female form brings forth, in Hardy's novels, a set of fit and healthy, brave and dauntless, remarkably *strong* women. The sexual vitality which infuses their animate life generates vigour of both body and mind; from thence springs intelligence, strength, courage and emotional generosity, and that capacity so many Hardy heroines possess for self-exposure expressing both daring and intimacy—the ultimate intimacy which demands facing the fear of ego-loss in those moments which call for abandon.

In terms of presenting a revisionary reading of Hardy's texts, or, within the specific context of female sexuality, of treading in his narrative footsteps, one has to begin, I think, with the reaction of Victorian critics and their disciples speaking today in literary publications and academies. Aside from possible fears of, or embarrassments by, confrontations with the physical, flesh-and-blood reality of women's lives, it seems to me that even while shuddering at the voluptuousness of Hardy's women Victorian critics shielded their eyes or, at any rate, did not fully expose the picture they had before them. For example, Hardy's most sexually passionate heroines, Bathsheba and Tess, conveyed nothing whatsoever, to contemporary readers, of their erotic ecstasy and orgasmic rapture—as, for instance, in those scenes where first the one sinks blissfully in the throes of ecstasy, her 'blood beating...stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet', 'enlarged', 'swamped', liquidly streaming, stung to tears (Ferns episode), and where the other ecstatically undulates on her orgasmic plateau, beyond 'consciousness of time and space', in 'exaltation', with 'tears in her eyes' (Garden episode). Certainly reviewers vilified the voluptuousness of both these women but, significantly, critical hostility was

not activated by these passages but by Hardy's *literal* presentation of the heroine's physical contact with the male body, notably Bathsheba's first ensnarement by Troy in the plantation scene, and Tess's trip across the flooded lane in Angel's arms. This critical perspective, in so far as indecorum is measured solely in relation to male/ female body contact, speaks of far more than delicacy of mind or a distaste for things physical. It speaks of total obliviousness to, or ignorance of, female sexuality: outside or beyond the physical presence of the male, beyond his compass, a woman's erotic life did not exist.

In an age that placed a high value on reticence, self-restraint, and certain 'feminine' qualities such as delicacy of health, a retiring disposition, a physical and intellectual timidity, and so forth, Hardy's women, with their admixture of qualities—transcending the stereotypes of madonna and whore—must have confused many readers caught with mixed feelings of admiration and alarm. Indeed, for removing the paragon from her pedestal and for raising the fallen woman from the gutter, for presenting humanly imperfect but lovable heroines, Hardy was, to his hurt and indignation, charged with misrepresenting womankind. The charge was unanswerable for, in a sense, his critics were right: the representative model, as personified by Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House, or Ruskin's Stainless Sceptre of Womanhood, was, in the amalgam, and in Victorian eyes, the most desirable, the most perfect of all representations.

Models of perfection are, however, in their very unattainability, tyrannical. And since women like men must fall short of perfection, their 'fall' and ensuing experience of guilt, shame and self-hatred inevitably ensured the continuance of their suffering and subordination and, ultimately, the perpetuation of sexual inequality and female bondage. It may well be for these reasons alone that Hardy abhorred what he called the 'perfect woman in fiction'. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of his conceptual framework is that he presents no perfect women in his fiction. On the contrary, his heroines' best faculties are presented in the context of their less-than-perfect natures in a less-than-perfect world not yet ready to take them at face value. But that the worthy and desirable must acquire angelic proportions if they are to remain worthy and desirable, that the world is unable to dispense with the sexual double-standard, that female sexuality still presents a threat to the dominant culture which refuses to grant women the opportunities granted to men, becomes, for Hardy, a tortuous theme of increasing importance to his work. The 'prosaic reality' in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, where two aspiring farmers rise to prosperity but only the female contender is denied legal rights and privileges, constitutes a primary motif modulating into a dominant theme in the darker work of *Jude the Obscure*. This motif finds its true parallel in the iniquitous Victorian marriage and divorce laws, in *Jude*, which are seen to be more intransigently ratified by secular law.⁴

Hardy relished the company of women and expressed no reservations about their powers, moral, intellectual, sexual, emotional, psychic; but he was not drawn to the liberal feminism of his day. While many liberal feminists agitated for equal rights with men, with which Hardy was in full sympathy, and while many others were divided, as was Hardy, over the question of enfranchisement and the problem of the under-educated voter, the majority of liberal feminists joined with the prominent emancipationist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, in upholding the view that woman's true destiny lay in fulfilling the role of wife and mother. Indeed, liberal feminists regarded marriage as woman's highest vocation, as in a calling to the religious life with complete abdication of the self to the institution.

Hardy was moving in a completely different direction. Early on in his career he had studied, taken notes and made diagrams of, Charles Fourier's⁵ work. The French socialist and philosopher held, amongst other things, strong anti-marriage views, but while the extent of his influence on Hardy has yet to be fully documented, one thing is clear: Hardy was deeply opposed to the liberal feminist's idealisation of marriage. Tending, instead, towards socialistic views and the abolition of marriage in its current institutionalised form, he was more readily drawn to the radical feminist fringe as, for example, in his support of the singular activist and anti-marriage campaigner, Mona Caird.⁶

Yet, while the lone anti-marriage campaigner, as embodied in Sue Bridehead, arrives late on the scene in Hardy's novels, she is nascent in earlier incarnations of his more dissident, rebellious women. Bathsheba's views on marriage, for example, while more tentative than Sue's, spring from a shared ideology and a shared feminine consciousness which hotly denounces the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of a woman's sexuality.

The lone campaigner inevitably drew Hardy's immediate interest for he was one himself. Indeed, his intense feelings of isolation, his deep sense of alienation from the Victorian middleclass world he had entered as a popular, if controversial, novelist, must have urged him to a close understanding of the condition of women, in so far as he and they felt, sorely, the impact of the society's institutionalised values; in so far as each had to struggle to be heard, to gain recognition; in so far as oppression by either class or sexual division was the experience of both. Not only did Hardy identify with the oppressed classes, seeing himself (to use his word) a 'misfit' in the society, and not only did he have to bowdlerise his own texts to tailor them to the Victorian drawing-room where public readings were encouraged in polite company, but he was also constantly, painfully, at loggerheads with critics. Such perpetual censure, such unremitting condescension on the part of critics, such a sense of suffocation, frustration and humiliation must surely have intensified what is in my opinion his acute sensitivity towards, and sympathetic insight into, the plight of women curbed and bound to 'fit' the world of men.

Yet critical opinion does not favour Hardy as a champion of those women, who, as critics would have it, 'disrupt' the community, the social order, the status quo. These disruptive women evidently unsettle more worlds than their own, and Hardy stands, I would argue, firmly behind them. From El-fride's embattled sexual confrontations with Knight to Sue's outrage at the notion, that a married woman should be regarded as man's property, Hardy's platform remains consistent and forthright: the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women, is to be, on his terms, the loser.

Opinion can be, even while one disagrees with it, opinion-shaping. At the same time, while discovering in Victorian criticism on Hardy an underlying troubled spirit, an understandable resentment at his iconoclasm, a rancour, even, at his intimate knowledge of women in an age that left intimate knowledge of women to women, so it seems to me that twentieth-century criticism in so far as it reflects and perpetuates the doubts and fears of Victorians on matters of female sexuality, has long outlived its usefulness as an opinion-shaping force.

My aim, in this book, is to present a revisionary study of Hardy's treatment of female sexuality, a new vision of his work, reshaping our impression of him through the refracting lens of his view of women. There was a consistency in his thinking on the

condition of women, although he was forced, at first, to hide or disguise his views. The disguise is not, however, impenetrable, provided we follow Hardy closely, perceptively, and adjust our outlook to his phenomenalist view of the world, to look keenly into and beyond the physical expression of things—reading both their ostensible and their hidden meanings. In other words, we need to read Hardy's prose as we read his poetry, that is with an acute sensitivity, not simply to imagery, structure and language, but also to perspective and voice.

The re-reading here is a question of emphasis which turns upon Hardy's own emphases: his skill in intercepting his own text with contrapuntal narrative voices, his poetic complex of metaphorical structures, his elaborate configuration of points of view. Closely interpreted, these poetic devices permit the reader access to an authorial perspective which can, and should, be differentiated from that of the principles.

The all-knowing, omniscient narrator has a range of approaches from which to choose. The principle ones are dramatic—recording actions, speech and gestures—and expository, revealing the characters' inner thoughts and feelings and commenting on the story as it progresses. Narrative point of view does, of course, all too often, fall between the two—between the dramatic and the expository. And with Hardy, given the subtlety and complexity of his narrative shifts, it becomes particularly important to differentiate between the perspectives of the primary and alternative narrators, whose points of view frequently diverge, and just as frequently conflict. I use the term primary narrator to mean the voice and perspective that, when distinguished from all others, proves to be recognisably coherent, consistent and stable, from the first chapter to the last.

For the sake of simplicity I shall speak of the primary narrator, throughout this book, as Hardy. For despite the constant re-alignment of perspectives and vantage points in his texts, a clearly defined, increasingly dominant Hardyian point of view does emerge. I say increasingly dominant because with time, experience, and a heightened reputation, he rapidly learned to exploit certain literary devices that allowed him to circumnavigate Mrs Grundy, thus gaining confidence in asserting his own voice—the iconoclastic voice we hear resounding loud and clear in *Tess* and *Jude*.

It is important, then, to an accurate reading of his texts, to trace perspectival shifts just as one traces patterns of images and tracks the rhythmic foot. Through this approach, of clarifying points of view and differentiating narrative discourses, of letting Hardy and his characters speak in their own voices, of separating surface text from underlying meanings and getting back to and beyond the physical expression of things, we will uncover hidden essences and new significations beneath the most darkly veiled utterance.

1

THE HERESY OF PASSION:
A Pair of Blue Eyes

In the post-Freudian age sexuality inheres in the psyche, or soul, whose guardians are the analyst and sexologist. In terms of professional focus the shift from Victorian physic to twentieth-century psychoanalytic is little more than a minor shift in emphasis from body to mind. A greater shift is evident in the sphere of professional influence. The monopolism exercised by the Victorian medical profession over scientific, biological, moral, ethical and empirical concerns scarcely finds its parallel today in what has become a profession of high specialisation and fundamentally scientific interest. We do not expect, these days, to have moral issues raised by our general practitioner, and emotional or sexual problems seem to belong, not so much to the surgery as to the guidance counsellor's office.

Mid- to late-Victorian medical theorists held that all serious discussion of female sexuality should properly be confined to the medical journals where, under the heading of pathological disorder, it would be addressed in terms of malfunction. In so far as all aspects of the subject—physical, moral, psychological—were confined to professional investigations into physical and mental abnormalities, a close association inevitably grew up, in the cultural imagination, between the two areas: the malfunctioning organism and female sexuality.¹ And as *The Saturday Review* (1896) inadvertently reveals in a review of *Jude*, this close association had become, by the late century, fully assimilated into critical thought. In common with other critics, the *Saturday's* 'Unsigned Reviewer' looks favourably upon *Jude's* sexuality but brings in the word 'malignant', more than once, in speaking of Sue's. The writer goes on to say that,

The respectable public has now got to rejecting books wholly and solely for their recognition of sexuality, however incidental that recognition may be...No novelist, however respectable, can deem himself altogether safe today from a charge of morbidity and unhealthiness.²

It is, of course, 'morbidity and unhealthiness' together with 'malignant', that reveal this author's attitudes while, no doubt, reinforcing those of the general reader.

Even as late as 1906, with the publication of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which shifted dialogues away from a clinical context, or from scientific discourses, into the oral histories of everyday men and women, members of the

reading public were shocked at finding themselves exposed to 'unhealthy' issues now expressed in lay terms hitherto obscured by medicalese.

Some decades earlier, in the 1870s, Hardy, too, had felt the impact of this proscription as critics, reflecting the views of the medical theorists, accused him of misrepresenting women by making his heroines too voluptuous. In a mood of bitter reflection upon censorship and prudery he later observed that even the imagination had become the slave of stolid circumstance. It was conditioned, he said, by its surroundings like a river-stream. He was hitting back at his critics whose fidelity to social expedients, as he saw it, prevailed over what he called an honest portrayal of the relations between the sexes. And vitally important to that portrayal, to Hardy's mind, was the very real fact of female desire, sexual understanding, erotic love, none of which had any connection, as far as he was concerned, with physical or moral infirmity, with mental or moral derangement.

Hardy was not only struck by the manner in which critical fidelity to social expedients enslaved the creative imagination, he was also concerned about the social expediency of enslaving women by denying them a sexual reality. He was clearly on dangerous ground here, and, in every practical sense, had no choice but to disguise his oppositional views while patiently negotiating the proprieties—avoiding 'unhealthy' topics as best he may. I do not doubt that he must have found a certain satisfaction in covertly defying Mrs Grundy, in the earlier novels, by endowing his more unconventional heroines with a sexual reality which, in the main, defied and eluded the censor at one and the same time. For 'patiently negotiating the proprieties' does not have a very convincing Hardyan ring about it, despite the fact that it would be twenty years or so before he could openly declare himself, in *Tess*, an opponent of the league of medical theorists, an opponent of the prevailing sexual ethic, and an opponent of the sexual double-standard—his vindication of the voluptuous fallen woman challenging those very Victorian literary conventions that, in absenting or rarefying or mystifying sexuality, reinforced the notion of its unmentionability, its topical ineligibility.

Certain other literary conventions also found Hardy an avid opponent. Codes prescribing sexuality topically ineligible in works of fiction, were matched by equally well-observed conventions governing plot. For example, the marriage-and-happy-ending plot. This may have gained popularity partly because of its intrinsic reformist ethic. Marriage saves all, ensures happiness ever after, but before receiving her prize of husband and marriage, convention dictated that the heroine should be brought to acknowledge her deficiencies, should then become penitent, should then reform. Love and courtship were thus co-terminous with moral reformation, and getting-married-and-living-happily-ever-after provided the most desirable consummation for both character and plot.

Behind this convention lay the principle that moral growth was synonymous with becoming socialised according to prevailing sexual codes and prescribed roles. This was not an equation Hardy, himself, would have made. Both the convention and its underlying principle came under attack in his later novels, and the equivocation that supervenes at certain critical points in his early texts points in the same direction. Where, for example, convention demanded reformation of a headstrong, wilful young woman, the kind of reformation Gabriel Oak, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, reserves for Bathsheba whom he would fashion 'meek and comely', Hardy confounds the issue by

adopting an openly ambivalent stance, or, alternatively, by openly reserving his judgement—clearly very ill-at-ease with such conventions and all that they represented.

I do not mean to suggest that the more dominant Victorian literary conventions inscribed passionless configurations over the outlines of love and romance. For, indeed, sexual mystique did generate a conventional language of love and courtship in the mid- to late-century novel that was not exclusively of the sexually antiseptic lilies-and-lace category. Heroines might flush and glow, for example, or pant and palpitate, and heroes might stalk, or strut, or transfix or thrust, displaying erectile signals of stiffened bearing and stalwart posture (accented imagistically by the ubiquitous cane or uplifting wing-collar). But, typically, these postures and gestures, despite their resemblance to sexual signals and responses, do not lead to sexual encounters. Instead they flow as perceptible indicators towards the inevitable happy ending; not towards erotic sublimation for its own sake but towards marriage for propriety's sake. What then appears to be sexual passion, embedded in figurative narrative patterns, becomes a means to an end and not an end in itself. It becomes, in effect, a function of plot, to nudge the narrative to its due end, not a function of characterisation revealing depth of emotion, sexual responsiveness and desire.

In a similar way, channelling the erotic life to an end short of actual sexual fulfilment, the maiden possessing sexual knowledge is labelled fallen and denied, thereafter, sexual existence. Again, sexuality becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself. Sexual experience brings no new self-awareness, no enhancement of life, no self-renewal, no epiphanies. In classic Edenic tradition, woman's fall alone is the meaning. Having fallen, she is effectively cast out, excluded from love relationships. Either she adopts the celibate, penitential or vocational life, as in Gaskell's *Ruth*, or, lacking adventurous, self-renewing powers (in clear contrast to her predecessor, Moll Flanders), she limps forlornly into exile—the obvious example, George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel.

In *Candour in English Fiction* (1890), Hardy, arguing against Victorian literary conventions, complained that there were only two courses open to him. Either he produced in his characters, 'the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances' or, 'by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head'. By the 1890s his reputation, and to a lesser extent his nerves, could withstand the thunders; in the early 1870s, neither could. Yet, from the outset he deplored:

the false colouring best expressed by the regulation finish that 'they married and were happy ever after'...a denouement... indescribably unreal and meretricious, but dear to the Grundyist and subscriber.... In representations of the world, the passions ought to be proportioned as in the world itself, life being a physiological fact.³

There was a third course open to him which he does not mention but which he did adopt. Coventry Patmore was one of the first to distinguish Hardy's prose as the work of a poet, and indeed, it was by employing the epistemology of the poet that he succeeded in circumnavigating restrictive conventions and the Grundyist, even as early as *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. This, his third published novel, was well received, and while critical acclaim surpassed all his expectations (*Life*, p.95), 'a kind of defiance of conventionality' in the book did not escape the eagle eye of *The Saturday Review*. However, and this is the

important point, the reviewer was unable to pinpoint the source or manner of the 'defiance'. And Hardy, in this instance, escaped the thunders.⁴

His first heroine, Cytherea Graye, in *Desperate Remedies* is not drawn into any form of 'defiance'. On the contrary, she is a thoroughly orthodox creation. Part Angel—self-effacing, noble, sexless, self-abnegating—and part Gothic personification of sensibility under pressure, she is, in her stereotypical ordinariness rare in the Hardy canon, betraying, I suspect, her author's sense of her feminine unreality, and hence unrealisableness in his imagination. But he does conceive of alternative possibilities of characterisation. This is suggested by one, very small, Hardyian impertinence tucked unobtrusively into the text where it is said of Cytherea's rival that,

She had been a girl of that kind which mothers praise as not forward, by way of contrast, when disparaging those warmer ones with whom loving is an end and not a means. (*DR*, p.148)

This covert approval of loving as an end in itself (the key word is of course 'warmer'), is too unrelated and understressed to signify in its immediate context as the narrative sweeps on apace; but it does signify in the wider context of Hardy's commitment to a sexual ethic, which, as his literary reputation improves, emerges with increasing force to re-state, in *Tess*, at far greater length, the very same principle—that loving should not be a means to an end but an end in itself. But the fact that it arises in *Desperate Remedies* at all signifies that, even given the most sexless of heroines, Hardy cannot be bound by the moral and literary conventions of the day, nor by the guise of respectability he had adopted in order to secure a market.

It is something of an irony that despite his efforts to conform, this, his first published novel, came in for censure not for small slips into forbidden ways of this kind, nor even for larger slips into closed areas of sensuality, but for falling into error on a simple matter of class distinction. The point of contention was not that his aristocratic Miss Aldclyffe develops a jealous, sensual attachment for the heroine, seeking her in her bed at night begging caresses and kisses. This the women could do with impunity since no male features in these embraces to give them sexual definition. Regarded as the emotional release of maternal or filial wells of feeling they were entirely innocuous; not a single reviewer discerned sensuality or erotic passion. Was Hardy gratified that in this respect at least his presentation of a deeply sensual feminine experience had passed muster? We do not know. But we do know of his shock at being attacked for 'daring to suppose it possible that an unmarried lady owning an estate could have an illegitimate child' (*Life*, p.84). That this should be the most perfidious of indiscretions was stupefying indeed!

To Hardy and his editor, Leslie Stephen, the Grundyists were both unpredictable and baffling: as late as *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy's fourth published novel, he was still having trouble keeping one step ahead of them. Aware that the fallen maid of his draft version needed considerable refashioning if her entry into the Victorian drawing-room was not to offend, Hardy transformed the gay-young-woman-about-town (after the manner of 'Melia in 'The Ruined Maid', 1866) into something approaching the sexually-enfeebled fallen-woman stereotype. But despite Leslie Stephen's half-apologetic advice—he was abashed, he said, by his 'excessive prudery'—to treat the seduction of Fanny Robin in a 'gingerly fashion', (*Life*, pp.98–9), and despite Hardy's own attempts at

re-fashioning, Fanny Robin failed to conform to type. Part of her nonconformity lies, I think, in her initial rebounding after her 'fall', where convention dictated otherwise; and part in her lack of penitence and hot pursuit of the object of her desires; and, no doubt part of it also lies in her getting to the wrong church on time—distinctly a male privilege.

Hardy plays down this particular instance of Grundyist pressure, in the *Life*, as an amusing example of serial-writing politics. But the reality was harsher. Censorship, he later admitted, 'paralysed' him. This may well explain his excessive textual convolutions in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, a narrative abounding in conflicting perspectives, contradictory voices and heavily veiled utterances.⁵

Stylistic convolutions also disfigure the text of *Desperate Remedies*, but they arise, I think, not from a struggle with non-conformist tendencies, but from a struggle with the genre. Following the rejection of his first book, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, Hardy was despatched by his publisher to try his hand at a Wilkie Collins-type novel. As his subsequent literary direction indicates he was not in the least predisposed to writing racy detective novels, so it seems perfectly understandable that *Desperate Remedies*, at its most stylistically awkward moments, tends to live up to the book's title.

Greatest difficulties arise here with the preliminaries; the result is an opening chapter embarrassingly pitted with falls. First Hardy enumerates a chronology. If the aim is to set a time-scale then it fails. The technique is far too tabular. Simultaneously, various settings are catalogued, presumably to establish location: Hocbridge, Christminster, Bloomsbury, Cambridge, London, Dukery St, and Russell Square—a proliferation of place-names all compressed into the introductory paragraphs on page one! Finally, a dramatis personae is shuffled out from the listings and data which is as ungainly as topography and chronology are lacklustre. Faceless, featureless, functionless, Cytherea Graye, Edward Springrove, Ambrose Graye, Huntway and Bradleigh are trundled out directory fashion—again, all on page one. They defy description, they defy even the imagination. And when the moment arrives for dialogue it is fairly evident that we are in the company of a very uncomfortable Hardy.

Fortunately this awkwardness in effecting an entry to the text does not disable the mechanics of plot once it gets under way, and by the time Hardy has completed *Under the Greenwood Tree* to embark upon *A Pair of Blue Eyes* he is no longer at odds with innovate technique. Instead he is at odds with propriety. Why? The answer lies in the arrival of the first in the line of his unconventional, voluptuous heroines, the first of his 'misrepresentations' of womanhood.

Elfride Swancourt is no iconic Victorian maiden awaiting self-definition through male endowment: the marriage tie and its award of a man's name, identity, economic standing and status. Sexual development, exploration and understanding present themselves to Elfride, urged by an increasing awareness of her own psycho-sexual needs, to be of primary importance to her growth to maturity and fulfilment. If, then, we are drawn to her, identify and sympathise with her, this is not so much because she exemplifies oppressed, subordinated womanhood struggling to gain the love of a good man, but because in her daring she puts herself so much at risk, because in her candour she is so self-exposing, because she is strong and weak, brave and fearful, headstrong and vulnerable: she is utterly human and we care for her.

Problems arise for Hardy because he too cares for her. Yet can he be seen to ally himself with her without risking censure? For, according to prevailing views, her moral

and intellectual seriousness should be undone by her sexiness; but Elfride is not so undone. Nor is her sexuality treated by Hardy as relative—that is to say merely activated by the male. Nor is it simply a means to an end: getting married and living happily ever after. Nor does it serve to aggrandise the male as the object of admiration, of respect, of adulation, of worship. Neither Stephen nor Knight enlarges in stature as the object of female desire. Rather, they diminish. Stephen, we are told, is not man enough for her, and Knight's fastidiousness opens up the question, in Elfride's mind, of his virility. She is not only sexually instigative, then, where the male is less so, she also sets the pace. This reversal of roles blatantly transgressed convention and openly subverted the ethical codes of the culture. Male control of the female depends in large measure upon his activating, and thereby regulating, her sexual responses, thus maintaining his supremacy. That she may not be beholden to him, dependent upon him, in this sense, undermines his power and considerably diminishes his authority – as is apparent in Knight's defensive reaction to Elfride's move towards activating *his* sexual responses:

'I almost wish you were of a grosser nature, Harry; in truth I do! Or rather, I wish I could have the advantages such a nature in you would afford me, and yet have you as you are.'

'What advantages would they be?'

'Less anxiety, and more security. Ordinary men are not so delicate in their tastes as you; and where the lover or husband is not fastidious, and refined, and of a deep nature things seem to go better, I fancy—as far as I have been able to observe the world.' (*PBE*, pp.324–5)

Not a little sexual knowledge informs these words, and Elfride is well aware of the transgression this implies even as she speaks. The tonal alteration in her language aptly reflecting what we imagine to be his coldly appraising stare, her candour gives way to camouflage. Criticism is veiled as flattering euphemism and sexual knowledge is presented as speculation. Initially hesitant ('I almost wish'), then eager, ('grosser nature', or sexually passionate in Victorian parlance), then less ardent ('not so delicate...tastes'), her verbal thrust gradually loses impetus. By the time 'fastidious' and 'delicate' have been covered by 'refined' the *volte-face* from courage to fear is virtually concluded. 'Deep nature' compounds the retrenchment, the speculative 'I fancy' counteracts the knowledge revealed, and 'as far as I have been able to observe the world' mollifies. However, because Elfride's fear, as well as her courage, is based on the strength of her insight,⁶ she arouses dread in her male listener. To eclipse the import of her words and no less her obvious power to disturb, Knight blandly cuts across her argument with cold reason:

Yes I suppose it is right. Shallowness has this advantage, that you can't be drowned there. (*PBE*, p.325)

That he so clings to the life-line with 'deep nature' that she hands him, turning the moment to personal advantage, belies his superficial air of calm.

Elfride's startlingly unconventional inclination, then, is to assess her lover's sexual adequacy not his wealth or social status. The pitfalls, for Hardy, are obvious. Her heresy,

together with her challenging alertness, sexual readiness and insurgent power to awaken in Knight an emotional latency as much to be feared as desired, presents her author with glaring problems of decorum. She is not only in danger of becoming alarmingly unwomanly in her awareness of sexual matters, in her assertion of her sexual desires, she is also (potentially) far too independent, far too lacking in submissiveness to be morally edifying. Hardy has no alternative. He must tailor his text to a more seemly fit.

Seemliness now appears in Grundyist guise—as a moralising, didactic narrator standing on the sidelines, so to speak. I shall refer to this speaker as the proprietary narrator, since its function here is to enter at intervals to provide moralistic asides with which to berate the wayward heroine, and, indeed, womanhood in general in so far as she might be identified (or identifying) with Elfride. The aside is a clumsy device. It is intrusive, platitudinous, self-righteous, and tonally discordant; although no doubt its edifying tone would have been reassuring to contemporary readers. Not so to Hardy, who, later in his career said as much:

The besetting sin of modern literature is its insincerity. Half its utterances are qualified, even contradicted, by an aside, and this particularly in morals and religion. (*Life*, p.215)

In fact, in making schematic use of the aside, Hardy exploits this contradictoriness to the full, in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, incorporating it into a dialectic of opposing discourses and discordant voices of remarkable argumentative vigour.⁷

In Elfride's case, the aside has to be imbued with a guarded severity to ensure that an unconventional characterisation does not enter the Victorian middle-class drawing-room without bearing the marks of correction. Because the moralistic aside alludes to the world beyond the world of the novel it attracts notice yet shrugs off involvement in being noticed. At the same time, one cannot say it belongs solely to the reader's world since it fits rather too well into the world that Henry Knight inhabits and would have Elfride inhabit. However, for Hardy's purposes, it operates judiciously and effectively to oppose both the rebellious heroine and her dissident author wherever and whenever the nonconformity of either surfaces injudiciously within the text.

Let us take some examples. Following directly upon a candid confrontation with Stephen in which Elfride has owned to having had an earlier admirer, now in his grave—the very grave upon which Stephen is at this moment seated—and in which Stephen has admitted that he is not the blue-blood Elfride's father assumes him to be but a local stonemason's son, the troubled pair,

Oppressed, in spite of themselves, by a foresight of impending complications...returned down the hill hand in hand. At the door they paused wistfully, like children late at school. (*PBE*, p.110)

The proprietary narrator now intervenes with:

Women accept their destiny more readily than men. Elfride had now resigned herself to the overwhelming idea of her lover's antecedents;

Stephen had not forgotten the trifling grievance that Elfride had known earlier admiration than his own. (*PBE*, p.110)

From this we are meant to infer that Elfride's attitude partakes of a universal law of 'feminine' passive-acceptance. While Stephen still struggles with his grievance with a 'foresight of impending complications', Elfride makes no mental preparation for a confrontation with a class-conscious father far more likely to be swayed by reasoned argument than by resignation. If we are to trust the captious 'voice', we must either accept Elfride's unquestioning acceptance of her destiny or conclude that the author has lost sight of her altogether. For where *is* Hardy's ingenious, spirited young heroine customarily so quick in intelligence and daring? And surely her lack of class prejudice should be to her credit? That it should be made to appear to spring from an indiscriminative sense trivialises it beyond measure. The question to consider, then, is the veracity of the statement: 'Women accept their destiny more readily than men.' Elfride does not. She alters her course, with Stephen, not once, but twice (the broken elopement and the broken date to meet in the church), and finally rejects altogether the fate of becoming his wife. And she is patently not resigned to Knight's sexual fastidiousness, nor to his attempts at domination, nor to his repudiation of her, which spurs a hot pursuit to London where, on the brink of reconciliation, she is restrained by the interception of her father who snatches her back to Endelstow.

If any character readily accepts his destiny it is Stephen. His discovery of Elfride's engagement to Knight in his absence spurs no hot pursuit, no valiant attempts at reconciliation, but instead a passive, if not unemotional retreat from the locality. And where it is not Stephen, it is Knight—pathetic victim of his own sexual anxiety and, we infer, atrophied sexual potency, which have bred in him a predilection for what he calls 'untried' lips (metonymically, virgins). Perverse in his desire to brutalise the very thing he values, he fails to claim the one woman capable of altering his direction, the one woman sexually empowered to rekindle his potency as she also kindles in him a heightened emotional and perceptual sensitivity.

If the comment upon the nature of women in general and Elfride in particular is emptied of veracity and meaning, what is its function here? I would suggest that it is introduced at this point to 'play down' Elfride's active, sexually assertive role in her relationship with Stephen; that it acts as the foil Hardy requires to placate the Grundyists. It is a self-conscious move but a very self-knowing one. Hardy is touchily aware of where his allegiances lie, as he is also aware that the time is not yet ripe for revealing them. It is then, an essential prop in terms of both textual structure and publication stratagem. But that the proprietary commentator introduces a point of view that conflicts with the evidence as well as offering false, not to say prejudiced, information about Elfride, says more about Hardy than about his heroine: he may be paying lip-service to convention—the conventional practice of dictating in heavy moralistic tones to women—but he has no intention of winning the case.

It would be to misrepresent Hardy to suggest that each and every negative criticism directed at his heroine is painstakingly controverted by textual evidence. This would place him squarely, and uncomfortably, in the Ruskin camp advocating a model of perfection (*Stainless Sceptre of Womanhood*). His intention is not to present woman with so exalted a concept of perfection that she must inevitably fall short of the ideal, but

rather to break with this stereotype, to characterise an individual who is human and flawed, whose lovability is not contingent upon her perfection. Morally sensible, sexually aware and mortally imperfect, Elfride is worthy in her own right and to be valued not for what she *ought* to be but for what she is. The only judgement Hardy controverts is that of the moraliser, the proprietary narrator, insinuating otherwise.

This stratagem of superimposing a Grundyist speaker to act the part of censor, as if to convey authorial disapproval of feminine nonconformity, functions throughout the entire novel. And the contradictoriness occasioned by the asides persists uniformly and with such frequency that I am persuaded of a purposeful conflict, an intentional conflict, thrust by Hardy into the text as he grapples, on the one hand with an unconventional heroine, and on the other with the Grundyists looking, as it were, over his shoulder. But let us take another example. Elfride, later caught up with Knight but not yet broken with Stephen, has it now said of her:

Woman's ruling passion to fascinate and influence those more powerful than she – though operant in Elfride, was decidedly purposeless. She had wanted her friend Knight's good opinion from the first: how much more than that elementary ingredient of friendship she now desired, her fears would hardly allow her to think. In originally wishing to please the highest class of man she had ever intimately known, there was no disloyalty to Stephen. She could not—and few women can—realize the possible vastness of an issue which has only an insignificant begetting. (*PBE*, pp.218–19)

Problems arise here as earlier. The prefatory glance aside at 'all women' is, with regard to Elfride, indefensible. There is no thematic evidence to support it. If her 'ruling passion (is) decidedly purposeless', why is Knight speeding back to Endelstow before the allotted time? The generalisation has no bearing upon (except to trivialise) Elfride's desire for 'much more than that elementary ingredient of friendship'. Delete the generalisation and there is no contradiction. Elfride desires; and this draws a response in Knight, who, as has been noted, is racing back to her prematurely. Reinstate the generalisation and there are immediate difficulties. The inference that Elfride (supposedly owning a 'ruling passion to fascinate and influence') is vain and coquettish openly conflicts with what we know of her, quite apart from the fact that it is impugned by what follows: Hardy's evocation of her sincerity, her tremulous, fearful heart.

Similar problems arise over the speaker's final observation. Textual and thematic evidence shows that it is not Elfride who could not 'realize the possible vastness of an issue which has only an insignificant begetting', but Knight. It is he who lacks perspicacity, it is he who narrows Elfride's world as by means of 'instinctive acts so minute' he has forcibly narrowed his own.

Perhaps his lifelong constraint towards women, which he had attributed to accident, was not chance after all, but the natural result of instinctive acts so minute as to be indiscernible even by himself. (*PBE*, p.345)

Upon the insignificantly begotten issue of their first encounter as reviewer and reviewed, which becomes the less insignificant issue of their early intimacy, it is he, not she, who imposes limitations. Not broadness of vision but purblindness, exacerbated by his mincing sexuality, informs Knight's understanding of the world, human nature, himself, Elfride.

From the outset he engages obsessively in his relationship with her. Hardy dramatises this imaginatively by paralleling the 'earring' quest with the quest of the lover in pursuit of the beloved. It happens thus. Knight at first ridicules Elfride's perfectly natural liking for bodily adornment, then patronises it, then feverishly hunts down exactly the right pair of earrings and then races back to Endelstow to press them on her. When she spurns them, 'feeling less her master than heretofore' (*PBE*, p.221), he presses them on her again: 'let me dress you in them' (*PBE*, p.300). Finally, with his gifts accepted, he presses himself upon her: 'Elfride, when shall we be married?' (*PBE*, p.302). Knight's mode of courtship is neatly and suggestively paralleled by his obsession with the miniature artefacts which he laboriously seeks out and fastens in her lobes—those fated earrings which she admits to liking but, more tellingly, mislays.

His need to ridicule, patronise, dominate, 'dress', and at the last, to shame Elfride is illustrative: 'How can you be so fond of finery? I believe you are corrupting me into a taste for it' (*PBE*, p.303). The accusation appropriately mirrors his egomaniacal obsession with reducing her to the guilt-ridden, child-like dependency so necessary to his preservation of male supremacy. His obsession with the trifling and small, the miniature artefacts which afford him the opportunity of touching her person, is equally instructive. For as wooing gestures (the roaming caress, the tender stroking, the long lingering touch), his are cramped to fussy, fiddling activities accompanied by a contraction of his world to an area the size of a pinhead: the minute perforations in Elfride's lobes. This contracted focus sharpens Hardy's characterisation of Knight elsewhere in the novel.

Take, for example, his repudiation of Elfride: this provides an apt, if sad, logical, or rather psychological, conclusion to an affair which, on his part, has been conducted with unremitting condescension. Pointing to Knight's dismissive farewell, which takes into consideration none of the 'possible vastness' of the issue, Hardy reflects that:

It is a melancholy thought that men who at first will not allow the verdict of perfection they pronounce upon their sweethearts or wives to be disturbed by God's own testimony to the contrary, will, once suspecting their purity, morally hang them upon evidence they would be ashamed to admit in judging a dog. (*PBE*, p.358)

Sure enough Knight does dismiss Elfride as if she were a dog: 'Remain', 'You will not follow me', he orders (*PBE*, pp.359–60). Leaving the stricken girl racked with 'convulsive sobs [which] took all the nerve out of her utterance', Knight then

withdrew his eyes from the scene, swept his hand across them, as if to brush away the sight, breathed a low groan, and went on. (*PBE*, p.359)

As his dismissive words and blotting-out gestures indicate, and as Hardy's spatial allocations of bound and boundless areas emphasise – Elfride 'in the midst of it – up

against the sky', Knight passing into interiors, 'going indoors' and thence to 'chambers' (*PBE*, pp.359–60)—there is no perspective on Knight's horizon that he does not constrict. The world, humanity, Elfride are reduced to specks by this man who comes close to perceiving this for himself as, to Stephen, he ponders:

All I know...is a mass of generalities. I plod along, and occasionally lift my eyes and skim the weltering surface of mankind lying between me and the horizon as a crow might; no more. (*PBE*, p.162)

This is also the man, we recall, who has purposefully 'impregnated [her] with sentiments of her own smallness to an uncomfortable degree of distinctness' (*PBE*, p.206); and who was himself to be, in telling proximity to the heroic woman in the Cliff episode, 'with the small in his death' (*PBE*, p.240).

Elfride, by contrast, in her attempts to divert attention away from conflictful issues, does not so constrict her world. Her will to self-concealment itself testifies to an awareness of the possible vastness of begotten issues. When she declares herself to Knight, her words betray just how vast:

I would gladly have told you; for I knew and know I had done wrong. But I dared not; I loved you too well! You have been everything in the world to me—and you are now. Will you not forgive me? (*PBE*, p.358)

These are not the words of a woman lacking perspicacity and foresight—as Hardy confirms: 'The reluctance to tell, arose from Elfride's simplicity in thinking herself so much more culpable than she really was' (*PBE*, p.358). In her newly reduced state of dependency upon Knight, Elfride's perception of her earlier independence and defiance looms disproportionately large. The issue of her indiscretion, which had earlier 'grieved her' (*PBE*, p.219), has now become an enormity fully realised in all its implications. Here again, the discrepancy between the worldly-wise commentator's observation and the characterisation and events which precede and follow it remains: that is, Elfride is quite justified in her self-concealment.

Invariably all attempts at sifting the evidence, of distinguishing between opposing voices and discourses, meet with the difficulty of identifying narrative shifts in perspective. This is the more problematical for Hardy's expertise in veiling such shifts, one might even say, his expertise in self-concealment. Take, for example, the following passage from the vault scene:

Stephen's failure to make his hold on her heart a permanent one was his too timid habit of dispraising himself to her—a peculiarity which, exercised towards sensible men, stirs a kindly chord of attachment that a marked assertiveness would leave untouched, but inevitably leads the most sensible woman in the world to undervalue him who practises it. (*PBE*, p.279)

Because the narrative leads out towards 'the most sensible woman in the world' without unsettling its focus, the shift in perspective is almost imperceptible—although it does now sharpen instantly:

Directly domineering ceases in the man, snubbing begins in the woman; the trite but no less unfortunate fact being that the gentler creature rarely has the capacity to appreciate treatment from her natural complement. (*PBE*, p.279)

Fortunately there are verbal prompts here which should by now be registering their muffled cues. The 'creature' who 'rarely has the capacity' for this, that or the other, has that familiar enfeebled air about her which Hardy's choice of the word 'trite' assists us in recalling. Thus alerted, we suspect that he has lost sight of Elfride for she was never subject to Stephen's domination, and has not, to our knowledge, wittingly snubbed him—not even where he failed at the game of chess where she had shown above average skills.

And with the following reference to Elfride's snobbery we are assured that Hardy has, indeed, lost her, altogether:

To such girls poverty may not be, as to the more worldly masses of humanity, a sin in itself; but it is a sin because graceful and dainty manners seldom exist in such an atmosphere. Few women of old family can be thoroughly taught that a fine soul may wear a smock-frock, and an admittedly common man in one is but a worm in their eyes. (*PBE*, p.279)

'Such girls' are not Elfride—she whose rejoinder to Stephen's misery at his lowly origins had been:

'No; don't take trouble to say more...It has become a normal thing that millionaires commence by going up to London with their tools at their back, and half-a-crown in their pockets. That sort of origin is getting so respected,' she continued cheerfully, 'that it is acquiring some of the odour of Norman ancestry'. (*PBE*, p.106)

Elfride cannot be accused of snobbery. Her opposition to her class-divisive father is clearly drawn, and even her impatient dismissal of Jethway as 'not good enough, even if I had loved him' (*PBE*, p.109) constitutes non-specific value judgement, not class-specific disparagement. In employing the same evaluative term later, but with reference to herself, her meaning is quite plain: 'If I had only known you had been coming' she tells Knight, 'what a nunnery I would have lived in to have been good enough for you!' (*PBE*, p.344). An appropriate match is surely the inference here. Aware that Jethway comes from a respectable, well-to-do background, Elfride is equally aware that her father (solely concerned with pedigree and not altogether satisfied with Knight's at that) would consider him decidedly ineligible. The issue of class in the Jethway colloquy is actually introduced not by Elfride but by Stephen, who, for understandable reasons, over-reacts to any suggestion of social difference.

To do justice to Hardy's close detailing in this context, Elfride's class attitudes might best be determined not only by her opposition to her father's views or those she expresses supportively to Stephen, but by her customary behaviour and actions. Her lack of concern for her own blue-blood or for appearances, as, for example, she rides hatless on horseback through the neighbourhood, stopping to chat at ease 'to old men and women' (*PBE*, p. 136), and her natural affinity with sexton Cannister (*PBE*, p.110), more than adequately testify to her native lack of class prejudice. In addition, the nature of her relationship with parlour-maid Unity is more than egalitarian. It is sisterly (*PBE*, pp.88, 151). And Elfride certainly does not strike Unity as the kind of woman to whom the 'common man ...is but a worm'. To Knight's question, 'Was he [Luxellian] very fond of her?' Unity replies: 'Twas her nature to win people more when they knew her well' (*PBE*, p.402). Now while I take this to be a Hardyian backhander at Knight (in *not* having been won to Elfride as have her husband and 'people' generally, he is clearly not one who 'knew her well', hence defective in knowledge and understanding), it also vouches, in the words of one who does know her well, for Elfride's capacity to win people to her irrespective of their class.

Although this particular moralistic aside made by the proprietary narrator on Elfride's supposed snobbery is also controverted by what precedes and follows it, the confusion of 'voices' in the vault scene remains. However, this single difficult passage is hardly enough to disable what Hardy has already established: authorial non-alliance with the moralising proprietary narrator.⁸

Drawing out the sexual double-standard that shapes both Knight's philosophy and the proprietary narrator's commentary, Hardy now raises the question of Elfride's self-concealment; but first, tactically, from the point of view of the prejudiced narrator:

When women are secret they are secret indeed; and more often than not they only begin to be secret with the advent of a second lover. (*PBE*, p.281)

We do not have to look very far for the contrary evidence. Nor, at this point, should the inherent contradiction in this statement require much deciphering. First, there are enough precedents set in this novel to establish the withholding of information, or practice of secrecy, as normative and not, as the above observation implies, the practice of inconstant women generally or Elfride in particular. Parson Swancourt woos and weds Elfride's stepmother in secret. Stephen is secretive about his social origins, and secretive with Knight in London as to the nature of his relationship with Elfride. His failure to acknowledge her in the vault scene leads Knight falsely to assume that the couple are mere acquaintances. Stephen does not argue the point. Knight, too, is no exception. In fact, his deliberate attempt to deceive his trusted friend is perhaps the most treacherous of all deceptions. Having lulled Stephen into a sense of false security, Knight plots to reach Endelstow to claim Elfride (whom, of course, he has just been vociferously disclaiming) before Stephen has time to do the same (*PBE*, pp.382-7). That unknown to him, Stephen has changed his plans and is simultaneously making a dash for the ten o'clock train from Paddington is a rough justice that Hardy, with his predilection for chastening converging courses, cannot resist.

Second, Hardy provides alternative thematic evidence to show that Elfride is intentionally secretive, as is her father, right from the start: the minor concealment of the sermon writing, the less minor one of her elopement, and of course the major issue of her secret love. These concealments are in evidence long before Knight's arrival and are by no means contingent upon his 'advent'. Consequently, the imputation that 'women', and by inference Elfride, have an innate tendency to deceive lovers—stated as if it were a universal truth—comes, with all other such imputations, into the woman-in-the-wrong category of misinformation.

Yet again, Hardy's alternative evidence is convincing and none too esoteric. But in the sequence that follows matters become more complicated. We are invited to contemplate Elfride's 'vanity':

Perhaps to a woman it is almost as dreadful to think of losing her beauty as of losing her reputation. (*PBE*, p.299)

This commentary refers to Elfride's defensive reaction to Knight's baiting: 'a luxuriant head of hair', he claims, exhausts itself and 'gets thin as the years go on from eighteen to eight-and-twenty' (*PBE*, p.298). Slighted and alarmed, Elfride is further distressed as Knight insinuates that the thicker and more abundant the hair the greater the risk of balding as, he concludes mercilessly, statistical evidence would indicate. All our sympathies go to the cruelly baited girl, until, that is, the proprietary narrator intervenes to impute shameless vanity: 'to a woman it is almost as dreadful to think of losing her beauty as of losing her reputation'. Is Elfride's candid self-appraisal now to be read, then, as vanity? As earlier, the shift in the moral register in order to invoke censure manipulates characterisation against its natural direction. Hardy has long-since established his heroine's healthy, bounding awareness of her youth and beauty. But she has nothing of the coquette culturally conditioned to display allure and enticement while devoid of sexual feeling for her lover. And as the following spontaneous outburst suggests, and would openly attest but for the narrative contradiction, Hardy, himself, sees her as more ingenuous than vain: 'It is dreadful', she cries out,

to hear you talk so. For whatever dreadful name the weakness may deserve, I must candidly own that I am terrified to think my hair may ever get thin. (*PBE*, p.299)

In truth, there is more vanity in Knight's self-presentation, the upright, steely, masculine stance signalling power and potency where psycho-sexually he is a starveling, than there is in a single toss of the well-adorned Swancourt head. If, though, there is more sophistry than truth in the supposition that Elfride's protestations 'would be difficult for men to understand' (*PBE*, p.299) (the suggestion is that women are too unconscionably vain for any man's understanding), it would no doubt be true of Knight. Hardy has prepared for this contingency. Knight would indeed find her protestations difficult to understand because he himself is balding (*PBE*, p.203)! Her spontaneous outburst, revealing no sign of repressed anxiety, touches him to the quick. He would not dare to draw attention to himself in this way. Ironically, where he had set out to humiliate he now finds himself a possible target, for Elfride's aversion to thinning hair reflects rather poorly on him. Quick

on the defensive—scorning her feelings which, in turn, permits him to misunderstand them—the scoffer turns an embarrassing moment to his advantage by shifting shame from himself to another, who now becomes the object of blame.

Whatever Elfride had felt before, she now feels the impact of ridicule while stoutly resisting ‘whatever dreadful name’ Knight might ascribe to her candid self-appraisal. He purposely misreads her self-evaluation and preoccupation with personal adornment, which is, simply, the outward expression of an innate grooming instinct. This perfectly natural instinct takes woman with her assistant, as it takes man with his barber, to the looking-glass in the expectation of enhancing self-presentation, which will in turn enhance display and signal sexual interest. Pointing to a double-standard in this context, Hardy draws attention to Knight’s cultivation of:

a curly beard, and crisp moustache: the latter running into the beard on each side of the mouth, and...hiding the real expression of that organ under a chronic aspect of impassivity. (*PBE*, p.159)

Knight’s trimming and clipping springs solely from a desire to enhance display. Likewise his adoption of certain other grooming enhancers which Hardy takes pains to bring to the reader’s attention. There is the urbane cosmopolitan, for example, who sports a ‘stout walking-stick’, a fashionable ‘brown-holland sun-hat’, not to mention a battered (well-travelled) leather case on his first foray out from the city to the Cornish wilds (*PBE*, p.183). Both Knight and Elfride are thus concerned with personal presentation in their different ways, although Knight would not, I think, invoke ‘whatever dreadful name’ to describe his own proud posture and cultivation of a hirsute persona.

If Elfride is at all representative of her time and clime (if not of her urban, bourgeois peers who were sporting hair-pieces during this period), she will display her fine head of hair to full advantage. Were she in reality merely vain, she would pose no threat. She would lack deep feeling for Knight and her gestures would be mannered rather than imbued with those subtle sex signals which he evidently finds too unsettling to handle. And if *he* is at all representative of his class and clime, her sensuous self-delight would be understood as voluptuousness threatening moral and mental disorder.

At one point, Knight does come quite close to discerning the true nature and function of what he calls, variously, ‘vanity’, ‘womanly artifice’ and ‘showing off’ (*PBE*, p.203). In his observations of Elfride’s testing-out activities on Endelstow Tower, he notes:

An innocent vanity is of course the origin of these displays. ‘Look at me,’ say these youthful beginners in womanly artifice, without reflecting whether or not it may be to their advantage to show so very much of themselves. (*PBE*, p.203)

Coming close, but not quite close enough—unable, in the event, to suspend his deeply entrenched puritanical values—Knight rationalises Elfride’s look-at-me sexual display as vain artifice, not female desire expressly testing male response. Moral judgement thus clouds the world which his sense-perceptions might at first register quite accurately, and female sexual receptivity, which urges testing behaviour, is marked down as mere vanity.

Knight thus enacts the exemplary Victorian, and Elfride's sexuality remains unapproved, unproven and (for Knight's peace of mind) unchallenged.

Stylistic prolixities, authorial ambivalence and contradictory accounts notwithstanding, Hardy succeeds in breaking new ground in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* without jeopardising his reputation. Careful not to offend against propriety, he quietly but emphatically reverses Western literary chivalric tradition in his depiction of a heroine of some courage and nerve who plays knight gallant to the hero in a scene which also goes some way to discredit his intelligence about the world around him. Affined to these gathering heterodoxies, Elfride openly questions her lover on matters of sex and, when spurned, hotly pursues him, demonstrating to the last those galvanising qualities of nerve-stepped daring and fear in the face of danger that empowered her to heroic action on the Cliff. Defending herself to the last with a demand to be given full recognition as a person in her own right, she challenges Knight with the words:

'Am I such a—mere characterless toy—as to have no attract—tion in me, apart from—freshness? Haven't I brains? You said—I was clever and ingenious in my thoughts, and—isn't that anything? Have I not some beauty? I think I have a little—and I know I have—yes I do! You have praised my voice, and my manner, and my accomplishments. Yet all these together are so much rubbish because I—accidentally saw a man before you!' (*PBE*, p.344)

Knight is quick of course, to cut her across by his customary method of re-stating the grounds of her argument.

'O come Elfride. "Accidentally saw a man" is very cool. You loved him remember.' (*PBE*, p.344)

In order to undermine her he has to shift the focus away from her point that her worth is not contingent, or should not be contingent upon who may love her and whom she may love. She has tactfully offered him an 'accidental'; he pushes beyond it to make it symptomatic, not of her capacity to love more than one man but of her inconstancy.

Hardy will not endorse this denial of her worth and self. Returning the two heroes back to Endelstow at the last, each intent upon claiming Elfride as his prize, he purposefully denies her to them. Clearly there is no longer any question of inconstancy. On the contrary, it is belief in her constancy that impels each hero to return and claim her—as Hardy illustrates well in one of the last conversations between Stephen and Knight. Conflated, their dialogue reads:

'Can it be that I have killed her?'/ 'You have killed her more than I?'

'I wish the most abject confession...could...make amends to my darling'/ 'Your darling!...Any man can say that, I suppose: any man can. I know this, she was *my* darling before she was yours; and after too. If anybody has a right to call her his own, it is I.' (*PBE*, p.396)

But neither is given the right to 'own' her and neither is given the satisfaction of claiming her death as his trophy. Elfride dies bearing another man's love and another man's life in her body. There will be no victory and no vindication for either hero.

By drawing Elfride right out of Knight's sphere to die off-stage, Hardy provides a fitting conclusion to a characterisation which has demanded alternating shifts and displacements of her person. Excluding her, finally, from Knight's bourgeois, puritanical world is Hardy's way of vindicating her: she dies the woman she claimed the right in life to be. She is loved and lovable in her own right as Unity testifies. Her accomplishments, her clever and ingenious mind, her emotional generosity, are not only imprinted upon the hearts of those who know her deeply but are also no longer subject to effacement at the hands of man, time or change. Nothing and no one can render her personal qualities 'so much rubbish', nor can either reduce her to a 'mere characterless toy'.

The bitter irony of the denouement, Knight's journeying by train to the same destination as his dead beloved (lying in her coffin in the next carriage) yet moving in an altogether different direction, not towards burying but 'bedding' her, aesthetically provides the most perfect of finishes to the parallel voyages, in this novel, and their parallel significances. Not only does Hardy's narrative abound in restless authorial shifts but so, too, does the plot. Elfride's growth to womanhood is mapped out in a series of hazardous journeys each of which finds her accompanied by one or other of her lovers. One thing is plain: journeying alone she is safe! None of her solitary, wild, equestrian exploits endangers her. But every one of her voyages, ascents, or traversings with Knight, in particular, threatens or injures her, and on each there is a divergence of inner courses. Elfride mentally or emotionally voyages in one direction, towards an exploration and understanding of the world—he in quite the opposite. The Cliff scene is pivotal in this context, first and foremost at the subversive level of woman-as-heroic-rescuer, man-as-creature-in-distress, and second, at the level of divergent courses: Elfride sets out to watch for Stephen while Knight sets out to watch for her; she is sure of her course, he inadvertently sets her off it. She had been caught in a similar situation with Knight once before. Feeling for some days undisturbed and slighted by his peremptory, superior manner, and, presumably, with an unconscious desire to disturb him in turn, she treads the crumbling parapet of the church tower, which in her youthful daring she had done many times before. Knight is certainly roused, but not to an animal alertness or to a fierce protectiveness, as Elfride might, instinctively, desire. Rather he raps out a schoolmasterly reprimand and, unnerved, Elfride trips and falls.

As the complexities of plot, or more precisely, the complexities of narrative stratagem, are unravelled, Knight's sexual exploitation, his parasitism, becomes increasingly apparent. As Elfride seeks routes of her own choosing either to settle her confusion, her sense of divided loyalties, or to arouse Knight to a recognition of her difficulties and of her need to test their relationship through a clash of feeling, thought and belief, so she loses vigour in his proximity while he thrives upon hers:

It was very odd to himself to look at his theories on the subject of love, and reading them now by the full light of experience, to see how much more his sentences meant than he had felt them to mean when they were written. People often discover the real force of a trite old maxim only when it is thrust upon them by a chance adventure; but Knight had never

before known the case of a man who learnt the full compass of his own epigrams by such means. (*PBE*, p.216)

As Elfride passes through emotional conflict to deep humiliation and pain, so this is matched by the repression of her sexual energies. This 'rite of passage' (initiation into womanhood), finds its correlative journey in the sea-trip from London to the West Country which locates, yet again, the lovers travelling to the same destination but with hearts divergent within. As the 'staunch vessel' ploughs its way through 'floundering...rushing ...dim and moaning' 'antagonistic currents', so Elfride, longing to throw off the burden of her secret past attempts another confrontation with her lover. But he will not, or cannot, respond. In the face of her tremulousness he is hearty, 'a certain happy pride in his tone', and as she falters so he is blithe; her unease is countered by his sanguinity, and as she is chilled by the minute both physically and emotionally—'chilled...like a frost'—so he is 'warmed...all over' (*PBE*, pp.315–17).

If Elfride seeks closer sexual intimacy and understanding with Knight, he is determined to ground her. But she is intrepid. Like the staunch vessel bearing her, she rushes on: 'You are severe on women, are you not?' To this attempt to soften him Knight blandly responds with:

'No, I think not. I had a right to please my taste, and that was for untried lips. Other men than those of my sort acquire the taste as they get older—but don't find an Elfride.' (*PBE*, p.317)

Stricken by his assumptions, needing to curb his train of thought before presupposition hardens to conviction, she cries out with a revealing projection of her inner fears on to the outer world: 'What horrid sound is that we hear when we pitch forward?' Knight, impervious, 'pitches' on regardless: 'Only the screw—don't find an Elfride as I did. To think that I...' (*PBE*, p.317). Blandly overriding her feelings, he has just proved her right. He is severe indeed.

The congruent metaphors Hardy introduces in this sequence all too vividly conjure Elfride's staunch efforts to contain her passion in the face of Knight's sexual frigidity, which chills and drains her youthful, buoyant energies. Riveted by the 'horrid sound' of his steely words expressing distaste for all but untried lips, and with his words falling 'upon her like a weight', she drifts into a 'dim and moaning', restless sleep, later to awaken in terror at her own nightmares and his voice calmly assuring her that 'the clouds have completely cleared off whilst you have been sleeping' (*PBE*, pp.318–19). They have, however, amassed in Elfride's heart.

In lighthearted excursions across the cliffs with Stephen there had been a time for a playful testing of her immature sexuality, which later led to her greater need to develop nerve, the nerve which failed her in London. Her first, precipitate flight from the nest had brought her down to earth with a bump. Hardy elucidates this well by means of the 'journey' motif. He tells us, by way of a prefatory leader, that it had long since been Elfride's girlish practice to set out on small journeys from which she would return with little treasures she had found (*PBE*, p.142). But there are no treasures to be had on the journey to London with Stephen. Metaphorically shaping Elfride's journey on horseback to meet Stephen as a journey-without-direction, Hardy intimates that she is by no means

ready to be launched into the adult world. Addressing himself to the most appropriate of symbolic actions, the young girl's manner of riding, he clusters all prose rhythms around the motion of her horse, the motion of turn and turn about. This aptly mirrors Elfride's strife-of-thought, her vacillation between emotional states of anxiety and expectation. Equally, the alternating pace of forward starts and sudden retreats bears a close rhythmic resemblance to the advance/retreat sexual behaviour of a young woman caught between desire and uncertainty. Unable to locate her true destination—onward or back—Elfride rides a distracted mental roundabout, patently unready for Stephen.

This premature journey, Elfride's first major attempt at finding direction, alone, unaided, and with only the ardent pressurings of her lover to guide her, might plausibly be seen as the prologue to all other journeys that take place in her short career. By the time the day comes for embarking upon her seatrip with Knight, expectation and anxiety have intensified to become, not closely related states propelling and retarding direction, but inseparable, unsegregated states. The rhythmic patterns and tensions of the earlier sequence, the gentle, rocking motion of the amenable pony, have become enlarged: the heaving, plunging motion of the sea-going vessel. Simultaneously, a contrapuntal effect introduced by the lovers' opposing moods highlights the tension: the complacent mind and the questing share no common ground. But the world, as Hardy presents the case, is not in accord with Knight. It is not with sanguine indifference that the staunch vessel's crew successfully navigates antagonistic currents, but with the applied energy, nerve and intuition that are Elfride's own attributes. She, however, has to manoeuvre alone and unaided upon this voyage whose speed she cannot alter and whose direction she cannot control. There can be no voluntary turning back this time. To compound the journey metaphor Hardy reintroduces Mrs Jethway, who, as the personification of guilt and punishment (drawing herself inexorably into shadowy association with Knight), is fast closing in on Elfride. On the London trip she had appeared at the last terminus, now she appears mid-course, before disembarkation.

The implications are clear. Elfride's voyage to self-discovery, to sexual understanding, to forging new horizons cannot be accomplished in Knight's world. He is incapable of encompassing new directions despite his seniority and experience; he is unable to encourage her to be the kind of person she wants to be, feels herself to be; he is not warmed but alarmed by her emotional resilience, her assertiveness, her sexual responsiveness. He desires but cannot yield to a woman empowered by passions he feels he does not own or command.

Elfride's last journey brings no prizes for anyone, of course. On the contrary, it brings forfeits for Stephen and Knight. This seems a harsh sentence upon the younger man, whose only failing has been to misplace his loyalties, to pledge too much trust, respect and confidence in Knight. As a 'Knight' in the making (his identification with the older man closely affiliated to the Grundyan world implies this) Stephen has, it seems, to pay a price. Yet so punishing a blow does sound a jarring note in what now appears to be a more coherently worked text than is customarily acknowledged. Alternatively displacing and reinstating his heroine as he grapples with propriety on the one hand and an unconventional characterisation on the other, Hardy ingeniously maps a course of increasingly fruitless voyages to mirror that unrewarding journey to womanhood which offers no prizes to the female challenger.

One of Hardy's most notable achievements in this novel is that he never permits himself to lose sight of his central character long enough to allow Knight the supremacy he demands for himself, and which propriety also demands of him. Neither hero nor superinduced proprietary consciousness so limits Hardy's imagination that he cannot find ways and means of steering between both and back to Elfride's struggle for recognition.

The struggle was also Hardy's own. I have laid considerable stress upon the contradictions and shifting perspectives in this early text to allay the misgivings of critics who put such elements down to faultiness of composition. Now that the internal organisation of the novel has been examined in close detail it is possible to regard them more in the light of a coherent, if complicated, literary stratagem. The more important part of this analysis, though, lies in the close attentive reading that is, to my mind, critical to an understanding of Hardy's radicalism, his defiance of convention, his rejection of prevailing sexual codes and practices, his commitment to the sexual reality of his women. If self-concealment was, in the early days of uncertain reader-response and uncertain reputation, as vital to his future as a novelist as to his deeply felt principles, it becomes all the more vital to our understanding of his work to examine, closely, the narrative guises and veiled utterances he adopts for this purpose. The radical Hardy, for whom female sexuality is neither to be degraded nor denied, for whom the sexually instigative Elfride is neither intellectually weak nor morally degenerate, shields, in each act of self-concealment, the iconoclastic spirit that must await fame and public recognition before coming out into the open.

Such a stratagem proved to be worthwhile. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was well received, and the *Saturday Review* was the only observer to notice signs of unconventionality in Hardy's treatment of his subject. It is not surprising that he held a lifelong attachment to this early novel, given its experimental structure and final successful delivery. Yet his struggle for recognition, mirrored in the major Wessex novels in the intense struggle of his women, is by no means over—rather, it *begins* with the transgressive Elfride and his conflictful struggle to bring her into being.

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- Blackwood's Magazine B

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