

Chapter 2: JUDE THE OBSCENE

Thomas Hardy and *Jude the Obscure*

If Turgenev's Russia seemed forever poised on the eve of revolution, nineteenth century England seemed so secure in its industrial and imperial dominance that it could take in revolutionaries from Russia (Bakunin) and from Italy (Mazzini) without a qualm. There were rumblings from the "dark satanic mills" where the poor worked and died, but no challenge to the complacently rigid class system of England had ever been effective.

The taboo subjects in Victorian English literature were not defined as political, but as matters of "indecent," usually sexual or religious. However, "indecent" covered a lot of ground. Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (dealing with prostitution, the factory girl's form of food stamps) and Ibsen's *Ghosts* (alluding to syphilis, the incurable epidemic plague of Europe) were kept off the English stage by a government censor, on the grounds of indecent. Ditto for anything that might annoy the leaders of the established church. This censor was appointed by the same government that kept the "age of consent" at twelve till nearly the end of the century so that members of parliament could freely indulge their taste for the child prostitutes spawned by the slums owned by some of these very legislators, and many churchmen. Today, when we weary of graphic sex in books and films, these few examples remind us of how a taboo on mentioning sex can crowd out serious issues as effectively as a literature fixated on sex can.

Unlike plays, books were not regulated by a government censor, but nearly as strictly by custom and the marketplace. After all, the few people who possessed the leisure and literacy to read books were not likely to want to disturb the status quo. The test of decency in books was what could be serialized in magazines considered fit to be read by a "pure" sixteen year old girl—that is, a middle-class virgin denied formal education, denied even the right to leave her home unchaperoned. By this standard, there was hardly any subject that could not be ruled out on the basis of decency.

Writing a novel that had anything to do with the economic, political, social, physical, and spiritual realities that determined people's lives was a high-wire act, a matter of omission and euphemism. Charles Dickens managed to sneak in some sentimentalized sympathy for the poor, while idealizing his virtuous and pure upper class hero and heroine, with whom most of his readers would identify. George Elliot went further into unpleasant realities and uncomfortable questions, fighting her readers all the way. But Hardy never had any intention of imitating their balancing act. He planned to go to Oxford and become an Anglican priest.

Thomas Hardy was born in Bockhampton, near Dorchester, in 1840, into an old rural culture that had hardly changed since medieval times. During his childhood he saw this culture swept away by industrialized farming, railroads, mass printing, and mass migrations. His father was a stone mason, considered a cut above a laborer because he employed a couple of men. His mother had worked as a cook and servant before her marriage. She was an avid reader who had ambitions for her first son—higher education and a higher station in life. She had a low opinion of marriage and urged all of her four children to avoid it. They'd have stuck together, living as two couples, sister and brother, and pooling their resources for the security of all four, if she'd had her way. She didn't.

Hardy did well enough at the Dorchester school and read as avidly as his mother, but there simply was no money for higher education. At sixteen, he was apprenticed to an architect's office. He continued reading whatever he could lay his hands on and began writing poetry. And although in church he heard sermons condemning men who try to rise above their station in life, he held to his ambition to become a clergyman—one who also wrote poetry, like the father of his classically educated friend Horace Moule. It was Horace who gave him the copy of Marcus Aurelius' stoic *Meditations* that he kept by his bedside for the rest of his life.

At twenty-two, when he had completed his architectural apprenticeship, he went to London, determined to become a serious poet and to prepare for university while working in an architectural firm. He managed to publish a humorous essay called "How I Built Myself a House," but he couldn't get any of his poetry published. More importantly, his four years in London finally brought home to him the bitter truth about his ambitions: there was no way he would be accepted to a university, even if he could fill in the prep school blanks, and no way he could get enough money for tuition, even if he could have qualified. By that time he also knew he had no real vocation for the church, especially not after reading Darwin and the Greek classics. In 1867, physically and mentally exhausted by his struggle to work, study, and write, he suffered a serious breakdown. He went home to Dorchester, where he recovered enough to work as an architect, and to go on writing.

But he had to face facts—novels were easier to publish than poems and might even make money. He decided to try one. *The Poor Man and the Lady*, subtitled *written by the poor man*, satirized the snobbery of the upper classes. (A fragment of this novel survived as a short story *Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress*.) The publisher who rejected it called it loose, lacking in incident, plotless, the usual things said by rejecting publishers (who could say the same thing about some of the novels they do publish). However, the editor, who happened to be novelist George Meredith, did Hardy the favor of reminding him that the rejected novel satirized the very people who comprised the market for novels. Meredith warned Hardy against "nailing your colors to the mast" too soon. First get a readership, a track record, security. Hardy took his advice to heart. If he had not, we might never have heard of him. He might have died a bitter, unpublished writer—rejected by publishers who feared offending their readers. Instead he began a career that might be called a slow-motion dance, two steps forward, one step back, but always in the same direction, toward reality, and toward the nasty, obscene truth of his stories—and of the oppressive society from which his readers profited.

But he would have to start by pleasing them.

In his next attempt, *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy removed any hint of class grievance and threw in abduction, murder, mistaken identity—every melodramatic adventure then popular. After many rejections, a publisher offered to take it on the condition that Hardy would pay for printing and promotion. He did, and the novel came out anonymously in 1871, while he was in Cornwall, working on a church restoration and falling in love with the rector's sister-in-law Emma.

Reviewers ridiculed the imitative excesses of *Desperate Remedies*, but one or two admitted that the unknown author had given a vivid view of the rural south of England. Again, the determined Hardy took the hint, dropped the sensational melodrama, and made his next novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, a leisurely pastoral loaded with atmosphere. The best offer his publisher would give him was to buy it outright, copyright

and all, for £30. This book got a few good reviews, and when he started his next novel, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, his publisher gave him £200 for serial rights in his monthly magazine.

An installment of this one came to the attention of Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf) who edited the prestigious *Cornhill* magazine. He asked for serial rights to whatever Hardy might write next. On the strength of this recognition and the money he had received, Hardy quit his job and devoted himself to writing the novel he was determined to make a big success, written under his own name for the first time. *Far From the Madding Crowd* was also the first novel in which he used the name "Wessex" to signify the Dorset area of England which was to be the setting for most of his novels. This time he knew how to give readers what they wanted: a spirited girl only slightly superior socially to a staunch working man; true love on a very bumpy road; a sunny, almost jocular narrative tone that assures the readers of a happy ending for the hero and heroine; a rural setting beautifully rendered; amusing rustic peasants uttering simple words of homespun wisdom.

Leslie Stephens (like every other magazine publisher, from Hardy's first novel to his last) censored parts of the novel that seemed to have words too strong or incidents too suggestive for a "family magazine." Hardy resented but never refused to make these changes, not out of diffidence or insecurity like that of Turgenev, but apparently out of ambition. He wanted his work published as widely as possible, and he needed the money he was paid for serial rights. When the novel came out in book form, usually within a year, he usually restored the original text.

In 1874, the novel was published, and Thomas and Emma were married in London. No family members attended. Thomas's mother disliked Emma as much as she did marriage itself, and Emma's family considered Thomas inferior. Her father was said to have written to a friend referring to Thomas as "a low-born churl who has presumed to marry into my family." (It's not surprising that often Hardy's fictional hero is a spurned "low-born" suitor who is morally, spiritually, and intellectually superior to his detractors.)

The couple returned from a honeymoon on the continent to find that *Far From the Madding Crowd* had been an instant success. Hardy was suddenly established as an important novelist. Reviews were good, though not all the critics were as charmed by the book as readers were. Henry James thought the novel "a curious imitation" of George Eliot, and complained that the character of Bathsheba, so admired by readers, was imitative of the "inconsequential, willful, mettlesome type which has lately become the fashion . . . alternately vague and coarse . . . always artificial." But all critics and readers agreed with James that, "The most genuine thing in his book . . . is a certain aroma of the meadows and lanes—a natural relish for harvestings and sheep-washings."

Publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd* marked the end of the happiest period of Hardy's life. He wrote it while he was young (thirty-two) and hopeful and in love. His success meant he and Emma must move to London, which he hated. Not only did city life literally sicken him, the social rewards of the literary life quickly soured for him. His marriage to Emma began to sour too. She had been a rather girlish thirty-one and his social superior on their wedding day. In the larger world that had opened to him, she was snubbed as a phony-genteel provincial. Their eventual move back to Dorset in 1881 didn't help matters. Hardy was closer to his material but also closer to his family. In Dorset, as well as in London during their annual visits, Emma felt herself to be in a hostile environment.

Another irritating factor was rooted in Hardy's character and in the character of his poetic talent. From early youth up through his old age he had the habit of falling in love briefly with young women and writing passionate love poems to them. Emma had to endure successive flirtations marked by feverish poems. Perhaps things would have been different between Emma and Thomas if children had brought a new dimension to their relationship, but none came. At any rate, by the time they had been married ten or fifteen years, Hardy was well known to be deeply unhappy in his marriage. Some people thought this fact explained his move toward darker novels. But Hardy's muse had always prodded him toward unsatisfied longings and dark endings. He had learned the formula for success in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, but he was unwilling to repeat it.

Hardy's next novel *The Hand of Ethelberta* marked "the end of happy endings" as D. H. Lawrence put it. Readers were not happy either. Not only did he give them an unhappy ending, but he temporarily abandoned his Wessex setting. Yet he was set firmly on the path to his best novels, which were "always the same," according to Lawrence, who defined Hardy's consistent theme as "the tragedy of those who, more or less pioneers, have died in the wilderness, whither they had escaped for free action, after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment of the established convention."

In his next novel *The Return of the Native* (1878) he moved back to Wessex, and dug deeper into gloom—to produce his first great book. The setting is the wild, remote Egdon Heath (the heaths between Bournemouth and Dorchester). The heroine Eustacia is as wild as her surroundings. Her passion for two men and her passion to escape to Paris are signs of a deeper spiritual hunger she cannot name. The "native" Clym, who has returned disillusioned by life in Paris, is described as having "the typical countenance of the future," that of a man with a "view of life as something to be put up with." As in *Madding Crowd*, disastrous marriages are conveniently dissolved by violent death, but one death is that of the Eustacia herself, while Clym lives on maimed in body and mind.

Leslie Stephens insisted on a happy ending for magazine serialization. Hardy made the change, adding the happy marriage of two minor characters. He even left it in place when the book was published. But he could not resist adding a grumpy note stating that "the original conception of the story did not design a marriage between Thomasin and Venn. He (Venn) was to have retained his isolated and weird character to the last, and to have disappeared mysteriously from the heath, nobody knowing whither—Thomasin remaining a widow. But certain circumstances of serial publication led to a change of intent. Readers can therefore choose between the endings, and *those with an austere artistic code can assume the more consistent conclusion to be the true one.*" (my emphasis)

Even the softer ending was not quite enough to please most readers, some of whom wondered if the uncontrollable Eustacia might be an insult to proper English womanhood. Most reviewers felt that everything about the book—the central characters, the overpowering Egdon Heath, the tragic yearnings and misunderstandings and accidents, the long-winded allusions to classic tragedy—were too heavy-handed. Yet the indefinable power of the novel affected the literary establishment in almost an unconscious way. Despite resistance to it, the book enhanced Hardy's reputation. As Katherine Ann Porter expressed it fifty years later, "That celebrated first scene on Egdon Heath . . . What could be more labored than his introduction of the widow Yeobright at

the heath fire among the dancers, or more unconvincing than the fears of the timid boy that the assembly are literally raising the Devil? Except for this; in my memory of that episode, as in dozens of others in many of Hardy's novels, I have seen it, I was there. When I read it, it almost disappears from view, and afterward comes back, phraseless, living in its sombre clearness" Somewhere, imbedded in all that turgid prose, was Hardy the poet.

Readers didn't like his next two novels any better. Most modern critics classify them as hastily written potboilers set outside Wessex.

But any doubt that he was a master of literature was removed with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Searching the newspaper archives of Dorchester, Hardy found an account of a man selling his wife. This became the seed of a novel that has been called a cross between *Othello* and *King Lear*. Michael Henchard, the drunken wife seller, stunned by what he has done and unable to retrieve or even find his wife, swears off drinking. He rises to high position in the central market town, Casterbridge (Dorchester), but then falls again rapidly, unable to alter the passionate, generous, selfish, warm-hearted, possessive, loving, proud, honest, lying, infuriated and infuriating character that makes the reader somehow love, pity, and identify with this awful man.

The Mayor of Casterbridge was serialized in weekly installments, which meant that Hardy had to produce frequent interesting events and plot twists. This necessity seems only to have sharpened his discipline. The novel moves briskly, with all the foreboding of *Return of the Native* but with none of the weight of its classical and literary allusions. Good reviews poured out, and critics uttered few of their usual complaints about his highly verbal rustics, though a few gave moralistic homilies about the true and permanent redemption Michael "should have" achieved. Hardy was now, without question, the most admired novelist writing in England.

Perhaps he now felt secure enough to reintroduce his earliest theme—class. He set *The Woodlanders* (1887) in one of the poorest areas of England, the forests of North Dorset, where his mother had spent her impoverished childhood. The heroine Grace has a devoted father who makes great sacrifices to have her educated beyond her humble station. The result is that she is unable to feel comfortable with her rustic neighbors, yet unable to find a place among middle-class people. Like most Hardy protagonists, she makes a disastrous marriage. Her husband is a feckless young doctor descended from an extinct upper-class family. Her father has pushed her into this marriage because he is unable to read obvious signs of faulty character in a "gentleman."

The book opens with a starving woodland girl forced to sell her one extraordinary possession—her hair—to artificially enhance the beauty of the lady of the manor. It ends with this girl mourning at the grave of the noble Giles, the humble worker whom both she and Grace loved, and who literally has died for Grace. The final reconciliation of Grace with her wayward husband is a sad parody of a happy ending, recognized and commented upon by her father and other woodland workers as a temporary stop on the way to a new cycle of betrayal and misery. Indeed these rustics are no longer comic relief, a la Shakespeare. Hardy gives them respect as simple, mostly good people, sometimes wise in their ignorance, struggling to make a bare living from land that is being taken from them by their self-centered and capricious "betters." And, while the stupid decisions made by Grace's father cause most of her unhappiness, his motive has been simply to give his

daughter a better life through education—a clear impossibility, says Hardy, under the social and economic order of the time.

Readers and reviewers liked *The Woodlanders*. Maybe, despite the dim view of the upper classes, the book was acceptable and respectable because Grace reconciled with her rotten husband. Stories of betrayal suffered stoically do not challenge the status quo. They more often discourage rebellion and give comfort to readers who live silently with similar betrayals and compromises.

Now established with a good income from his writing, Hardy could have written whatever he wanted to. He still called himself a poet and wrote poems, but he had ideas, he wrote in his journal, for at least two more novels, one based on some early trouble in the life of his grandmother and one about a young man who (like Hardy himself) "could not go to Oxford." It was time to "nail his colors to the mast."

The first idea, about a milkmaid seduced and abandoned, became *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess is seduced and abandoned twice. Her first seducer is Alec, an upper class libertine, the stock villain of Victorian melodrama, who virtually rapes her, then leaves her pregnant. Her baby daughter dies after a few months, refused baptism by the local preacher. The second man, ironically named Angel, is an upper class prig who marries her, then abandons her when he learns she is not "pure." Hardy made much of the subtitle of the book, *a pure woman faithfully presented*. Tess completely accepts the conventions of the day defining the innocence and purity of women. However, she lives in a society where neither her shiftless family nor custom nor law offer a peasant girl protection and support, let alone facts with which to arm herself. The staunch, sensible, and handsome peasant suitor of the earlier novels is absent, not even presented as a lost alternative. Therefore, a beautiful and passionate poor girl may easily be exploited and—if remaining "pure" in her belief—driven to violence and destruction by the "justice" of a cruel society in an indifferent universe.

Trouble with the magazines began before he had written many chapters. Even Hardy's fame didn't give him the clout to overcome the strictures for "family reading." The newspaper publishing company that had contracted to syndicate the novel backed out after seeing part of the manuscript. Hardy sent it to two magazines that had published his other novels; both turned it down. Grimly, Hardy sat down and gutted the book himself before submitting it to another magazine. In addition to many short deletions, there were two major changes: instead of the rape/seduction of Tess, Alec tricks Tess into a bogus wedding ceremony; the second change is even more drastic—no baby. This slashed version was accepted by the *Graphic*, provided that a few more changes were made, like the scene in which Angel carries four milkmaids, one by one, including Tess, across a flooded section of the road. The publisher asked that the scene be altered so that Angel happens to find a wheelbarrow with which he transports them in a more "decent" manner.

The novel no longer made any sense, but was now proper enough for a family magazine. Hardy could at least look forward to restoring the original text in the book published in 1891. The first reviews of the book were raves. Then came the usual attacks, a "clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust," and "far from plausible," "a story with a moral, that moral . . . being, apparently, the malevolent constitution of the world . . ." Even some artist friends of Hardy disliked the book—like Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote to Henry James (never a fan of Hardy), "Tess is one of the worst, weakest, least sane, most forced books I have yet read . . . I write in anger? I almost think I do; I

was betrayed in a friend's house" Forty years later Virginia Woolf wrote that Hardy's "novels are full of inequalities; they are lumpish and dull and inexpressive," but contain "moments of vision . . . vivid to the eye, but not to the eye alone, for every sense participates. But the power goes as it comes." Again, the poet bursting through the constraints of an uncongenial form?

In *Tess*, that poetic power captured a wider readership than ever. Sales soared. Reprint followed reprint. Hardy was now a very rich, very angry man. Negative reviews infuriated him. He answered some of them bitterly in a preface to the fifth edition of *Tess* in 1892. Even worse than the prudes who called his stories "sordid" were the "literary" complainers, critics with "causes to advance, privileges to guard." In his diary, he wrote, "Well, if this sort of thing continues, no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at."

But there was still the idea of the young man "unable to go to Oxford," and perhaps this story was closest to his own heart, forever wounded by the class walls erected against him. But why bother? He had fame and money enough to turn back to poetry. Why "stand up to be shot at"? Maybe for the sake of all those other young men unable to go to Oxford, those who lacked the genius and the luck to become rich and famous and written about by men who had gone to Oxford. Men and women whose lives were stunted or destroyed by the class system, the marriage laws, the hypocritical church, and the English prudery that forbade discussion of any of them.

Jude the Obscure tells the brief thirty-year life of the poor orphan Jude, whom we first see as a child beaten for being too soft-hearted to do his job—frighten birds away from freshly scattered seeds. The book is divided into six sections, each named for a place where Jude lives within the Dorset area of England that Hardy calls Wessex. Jude is born, then orphaned, in Marygreen. His Aunt Drucilla frequently reminds him that his prospects are so poor, it would have been better had he died with his parents. They, in fact, never even should have married because bad marriages run in the family. From the top of a rise on a clear day, Jude can see the spires of Christminster (Oxford), the destination of the teacher Phillotson, who has filled Jude with awe and ambition for scholarly effort.

Jude tries to study on his own, but when adolescent hormones surge, he is easily trapped into marriage by Arabella, a sensuous girl, who pretends to be pregnant by him. Their basic incompatibility is illustrated in the famous pig-slaughtering scene, when, to Arabella's disgust, Jude mars the slaughter by stabbing deeply to end the pig's suffering, instead of bleeding it slowly to increase the value of the meat. No sooner is he disillusioned with his marriage than Arabella becomes bored with it and leaves for Australia. Now Jude is free to go to Christminster.

He gets work there as a stone mason working literally in the shadow of the great university as he continues to study. His cousin Sue, also an orphan, seeks him out. The attraction between them is instant. Not only is Sue ethereally beautiful; she is dazzlingly intellectual in Jude's eyes. Although he learns that his teacher Phillotson did not succeed in entering the university, Jude finally gets up the courage to write, applying for admission. He receives a brief, dismissive answer telling him he would do best by "remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade." He gets drunk. Acting on a dare made by students drinking in the tavern, Jude stands on a table in the bar and recites the Apostles Creed in Latin. His astonishing knowledge (for a working man) stuns his

listeners while mocking his scholarly ambitions, his futile accomplishment, and his shattered faith.

However, his failed educational aims have already been blurred again by the imperative of sexual passion—this time aroused by the elusive Sue instead of the all-too-available Arabella. But when Sue returns his love, Jude must tell her he can't marry her because he is already married. Rebounding furiously, Sue marries Phillotson but refuses to sleep with him. In despair, Jude visits his ailing Aunt Drucilla, who is not at all surprised that Sue is repeating the family habit of making disastrous marriages. Again Jude ends up at the local tavern, where he finds Arabella (who will continue to flit in and out of Jude's life like a mischievous if not utterly malign ghost) working, having left her Australian husband. She and Jude spend the night together, but then she leaves again, hoping to be reunited with her barkeep husband in the heavy-drinking London district of Lambeth. She asks for a divorce from Jude so she can clean up her bigamous record.

When Aunt Drucilla is near death, Jude and Sue meet in Marygreen, where Sue stays overnight with a friendly widow. During the night a sinister metaphor emphasizes their situation. Jude gets up to end the misery of a rabbit caught and screaming in an iron trap. He finds and kills the rabbit just outside Sue's window and looks up to see her watching him give the rabbit its freedom in the only form left to it—death. When Sue leaves Marygreen, they are overcome by their feelings. At the train station, they kiss passionately for the first time. Sue returns home to beg Phillotson to release her to live with Jude; he finally agrees. He even proceeds to divorce her so that, when Jude gets his divorce, the two may marry legally. The reward for Phillotson's generosity is that his career is ruined by the gossip surrounding his "condoning" Sue's adultery.

In Aldbrickham, their next home, Sue refuses to marry Jude legally, and she continues to refuse sex with him. She fears the chilling effect on love of both legal ties and a man's carnal satisfaction.

Hardy later wrote, "Sue is one of those young women who has always had an attraction for me." Another of the unattainable young women he was always writing poems to? More than that. Sue is afraid to "yield herself"—as the Victorians described sex for women, a passive surrender. To call her frigid is too simple. Sue knows the fragility of the power held by a pretty young virgin. In the natural course of things, a young virgin becomes a mother, dependent on a man, whose ardor wanes. Sue wants to retain her power, whose only chance of survival lies in Jude's passion not being satisfied. And Jude rather respects her for it.

Sue and Jude don't discuss issues as basic as these. Whenever Hardy comes close to discussion of sexual politics, he veers away into abstract discussions about marriage law and class. Even at that abstract level, he was pushing the limits of what could be hinted at, let alone made explicit, even in the book that would be published, let alone in the magazine installments.

Jude patiently endures Sue's refusal of sex until another appearance of Arabella scares Sue into Jude's bed. Arabella withdraws once more, but sends to them a strange, depressed seven-year-old boy, the fruit of Jude's previous encounter with her, and named after him. With the arrival of the solemn Little Jude, things go downhill fast.

In a breathlessly short summary transition, we are told that Sue and Jude have had two children (not even given names) and that Sue is again pregnant. They have moved from town to town, fleeing the disapproval of neighbors and employers who suspect their

non-legal status, although they now pretend to be legally married, and could be, were it not for Sue's continual rejection of legal bonds. When Jude's health fails, they survive by baking and selling cakes in the shapes of spires and towers, "Christminster Cakes," sugary parodies of Jude's original ambitions. As soon as he is on his feet, Jude insists that he wants to live in Christminster again.

In Christminster, it takes hours in the pouring rain to find a temporary room for Sue and the three children. After Jude leaves to hunt for housing, Sue blurts out their unmarried status to the landlady and is told she and her children must leave by morning. Early in the morning she goes out alone to find Jude at an inn. They breakfast there and talk. When they return they find that Little Jude has hanged himself and the other children, leaving a note: "because we were too menny." Sue miscarries, then collapses into grief- and guilt-stricken religious mania. She goes back to Phillotson (who is willing to have her if only to help get his career back on track) and tells Jude he should remarry Arabella, who is, as usual, waiting on the sidelines, and for some reason is eager to get him drunk enough to go through the ceremony. When Jude's health declines seriously, he makes one last trip, walking miles through a cold, driving rain, his purpose to see Sue one more time and then let the rain finish him off. As he dies, Arabella is already working on her next matrimonial prospect.

My bare summary of the plot might leave you thinking, what a depressing novel, who needs it? That's because you've read my words, not Hardy's. He gives us an uncompromisingly bitter reality, but in countless images that burn themselves into our minds: the pig-slaughter, so disgusting to robust Arabella only because humane Jude has botched it; the spires of Christminster (Oxford) always in view, in reality and in Jude's futile dreams; the rabbit screaming in the trap as Jude looks up at Sue in the window; the constant, irresistible demands of sex tripping him up, as nature itself conspires with an unjust society to keep Jude in his place; Jude's drunken recital of a sacred creed, for privileged students, in the dead language they learn within the walls of Christminster, closed to him. Stories and images may be ugly, but when they are deeply true, they are beautiful, and sacred. They are art.

As A. Alvarez put it, "The power of *Jude the Obscure* is, then, less fictional than poetic. It arises less from the action or the fidelity of the setting than from the wholeness of the author's feeling. It is a tragedy whose unity is not Aristotelian but emotional. And the feelings are those which were later given perfect form in Hardy's best poetry."

The novel was under contract to be serialized in *Harper's* in 1894-95, but, of course, it had to be severely censored. This time Hardy refused to do it himself, but gave the publishers permission to make whatever changes they required. They dismembered it, rendered it pointless by obliterating the fact that Jude and Sue live together and have children together. Hardy was furious. All he could do was to wait for publication of the book, which would restore some sense to the story. He must have anticipated some trouble because, when the book was published late in 1895, he added a slightly defensive preface. *Jude the Obscure*, he wrote, was a "novel addressed to men and women of full age" and would address two themes: "The fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity" and "the tragedy of unfulfilled aims."

If he had been shot at by some critics of *Tess*, he was shelled and bombed by the early response to *Jude*. The book was called "a shameful nightmare." Reviews carried

titles like "Jude the Obscene" by "Hardy the Degenerate," a novel "largely compounded of hoggishness and hysteria." His faithful admirer and friend Edmund Gosse wrote a review using words like "gloomy" and "grimy." Publicly, at their club, he told Hardy he believed *Jude* was the most indecent novel ever written. Bishop Howe of Wakefield announced that he had burned his copy and followed up by quietly applying pressure to have *Jude* withdrawn from libraries. The popular novelist Mrs. Oliphant accused Hardy of joining the "Anti-Marriage League."

Later there was praise from writers like H.G. Wells, Swinburne, and Havelock Ellis. Hardy received interesting letters, like one from a German critic who said that the complex character of Sue illustrated a new kind of young woman he had observed—intellectual, sexually ambivalent, fighting the traditional position of women. And Hardy's publisher assured him that sales were brisk despite (or because of?) the accusations of obscenity. (Hardy received one irate letter from a reader who said he had been led to believe that the book was pornographic and was bitterly disappointed.)

Hardy couldn't have been surprised, but he was wounded as ever by the adverse reactions. As usual, his muse prodded him most effectively with sad or grim themes. He wrote some of his finest and most bleak poems during this period. "Wessex Heights" (1896) expressed his depression after the publication of *Jude*. In this poem he stands on the rise, looks down, and thinks:

Down there they are dubious and askance; there is nobody thinks as I,
But mind-chains do not clank where one's next neighbour is the sky.

The same poem contained a couple of lines regretting the indifference of "one rare, fair woman" who is obviously not Emma, but most likely one of their friends, Florence Henniker. As if Emma weren't already fed up. She took very personally the bitter statements about marriage in *Jude*. Being the wife of The Great Man was exhausting and sometimes demeaning. And now *he* was complaining of marriage! Emma had always helped with research, had given comments and advice as a manuscript progressed. Now she told a guest that *Jude* was the first of his novels that she had not seen before publication, and that if she had seen it, it would not have been published without changes.

Emma was right. The novel did need changes—though not the ones she probably would have wanted—especially in the final section where Jude and Sue continue their abstract conversations as if their children did not exist. In fact, there is nothing real about the two younger children, who only appear and then disappear. Little Jude, Jude's child by Arabella, is a weirdly real child, prophetically chilling to a modern reader, but he too seems dragged in rather late simply to complete the tragedy in a grisly manner. Incidents and actions strain credibility. No minimally caring mother—even one as devoted to honesty as Sue—would blurt out her irregular status and risk having her children put out of hard-won lodgings into an icy storm. Nor would she leave small children alone for several hours, long enough for a leisurely breakfast and for some disaster—if not the murder-suicide—to happen. Jude's judgment on Sue's resulting total breakdown has nothing to do with the circumstances: "Strange difference of sex, that time and circumstance, which enlarge the views of most men, narrow the views of women almost invariably." This, about a woman who has just miscarried after her stepson has killed her two children? It is not credible as something that Jude would say about the distraught Sue, but rather as something Hardy might say about Emma, who had turned churchy on

him, partly because her position in Dorset, as the wife of the writer of obscenity, had become impossible. There seems, in the latter part of *Jude*, to be an impatience, a forcing of events, a hasty annihilation of hope and of characters—as if Hardy were tired of tiptoeing around a risky subject and fed up with the demands of novel-plotting.

Hardy's problems with craft gave ample grounds for attacks by hostile critics and readers. Instead the attacks stuck to sex, religion, and marriage law, the hot button issues certain to infuriate "family values" guardians. When these readers saw abandoned children starving on the streets, they blamed the suffragettes, not their own adolescent sons who impregnated the maid they then threw out for her "immorality." What better way to avoid discussing the rigid economic barriers that benefited these readers, but destroyed Jude's hopes, talent, and finally his life? Had Hardy really written some new challenge to the status quo? Certainly he had touched on all these themes in earlier books. Why this fresh outrage at Hardy?

Could it have been the times? There actually had been some modifications in marriage law to make women and children not quite so completely the property of men. A few women of a higher class than servants, prostitutes, and factory hands were supporting themselves as well as agitating for the vote. (Emma too marched in suffragette parades.) Darwin had had half a century to trickle down to the most narrow creationists, shaking the power of churches. There were visible cracks in the old certainties. Was it possible that divorce would become available? that women would demand their own money and work and—eventually—even sexual pleasure? while socialist agitators and unions would rouse the workers against their betters, who weren't even attending church regularly? Most amazing change: a few poor men had gotten into Oxford and had been elected to minor offices. England was unknowingly on the brink of even more vast changes and losses—including her empire. The fury of the attacks against *Jude* tell us less about the content of the book than about the obsessions and insecurities of many who read it—and many more who did not.

Hardy wrote more and more poems, sometimes venting his anger about the ongoing attacks. In "Lausanne" (1897), he imagines the ghost of Gibbon appearing to him with a question:

"How fares the Truth now?—Ill?
Do pens but slyly further her advance?
May one not speed her but in phrase askance?
Do scribes aver the Comic to be Reverend still?

"Still rule those minds on earth
At whom sage Milton's wormwood words were hurled:
*'Truth like a bastard comes into the world
Never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth!'*" (Hardy's emphasis)

In his diary, he wrote, "To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel—which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries—will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think

is the same thing. If Gallileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone."

He never mellowed in his feeling about the reaction to *Jude*. In 1912, sixteen years after the initial publication of *Jude the Obscure*, he wrote his Postscript to the new edition, recounting his experience in which "the sad feature of the attack" was that the story he told, that of "shattered ideals of the two chief characters . . . was practically ignored by the adverse press of the two countries." Critics later "discovered that Jude was a moral work—austere in its treatment of a difficult subject," but it was too late, "the experience completely curing me of further interest in writing novels." All could be summarized by saying, "We Britons hate ideas."

Should we regret Hardy's decision to write no more novels? Tillie Olsen includes Hardy in her book *Silences*, stating that some of the poems he wrote over the next thirty years, "cry out for fuller, broader treatment"—presumably in a novel. On the other hand, Lytton Strachey called Hardy's poems "compressed dramatic narratives" which gave the reader "in that moment the tragedies of whole lives." In other words, they don't cry out for broader treatment, they accomplish what poetry is supposed to do—suggest volumes.

By 1898 Hardy had written enough poems to publish a collection, *Wessex Poems*. The critics were no kinder to him. A typical review: "As we read this curious and wearisome volume, these many slovenly, slipshod, uncouth verses, stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived and worse wrought, our respect lessens to vanishing-point, and we lay it down with the feeling strong upon us that Mr. Hardy has, by his own deliberate act, discredited that judgment of the presentation of life on which his reputation rested." If such criticism bothered Hardy, it didn't stop him. Fifteen years and many poems later Lytton Strachey wrote more respectfully of Hardy's poetry, but still somewhat uncomfortably. Hardy's 1914 collection, *Satires of Circumstance*, was "full of poetry; and yet it is also full of ugly and cumbrous expressions, clumsy meters, and flat, prosaic turns of speech."

By that time the hypocritical world Hardy battled had exploded into World War I. When young poets like Siegfried Sassoon came back from the trenches, they came with homage to Hardy, whose cadences spoke to them in a new, twentieth century voice. By the time Hardy died in 1928, he had written more than 900 poems (100 of them passionate love poems written to Emma after she died—as usual, loss and regret inspired him). In 1940 W. H. Auden called him "my poetical father."

Paradoxically then, although "truth, like a bastard" certainly suffered from the literary lynching syndrome—Hardy and we gained by the hostile pressures that recreated Hardy the Poet. Those pressures, plus the enormous good luck of a healthy old age, gave Hardy a new career. Or gave him the career he had wanted in the first place.

SOURCES

- Gittings, Robert *Young Thomas Hardy*, 1975
 Thomas Hardy's Later Years, 1978
- Gittings and Manton *The Second Mrs. Hardy*, 1979
- Guerard, Albert J. ed. *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1963
- Hardy, Thomas *Far From the Madding Crowd*, 1874
 The Return of the Native, 1878 (Norton Critical Edition
 1969, with background and criticism)
 The Trumpet-Major, 1880
 The Mayor of Casterbridge, 1886
 The Woodlanders, 1887
 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, 1891 (Norton Critical Edition
 1965, with background and criticism)
 Jude the Obscure, 1895 (Norton Critical Edition
 1978, with background and criticism)
 Complete Poems, 1898—1928
- (as Florence Hardy) *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 1930
- Howe, Irving *Thomas Hardy*, 1966
- Hurst, Alan *Hardy: An Illustrated Dictionary*, 1980
- Lawrence, D. H. *Study of Thomas Hardy*, 1936
- Millgate, Michael *Thomas Hardy*, 1982
- Seymour-Smith, Martin *Hardy*, 1994
- Strachey, Lytton “Mr. Hardy's New Poems,” 1914