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PATTERNS OF JUDGMENT:
THE RHETORIC OF GEORGE ELIOT
AND THOMAS HARDY

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December 1972.
For the uninitiated layman, viewing from a distance the great flood of literary criticism, it must be a puzzle what all those books about books can be saying. The student of fiction, having waded through some of that flood, often tends to despair of saying anything fresh about such well-thumbed worthies as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. And at times the scholar committed to the production of so many thousand words on his approved topic is tempted to unkind thoughts about those who unduly increase his reading list.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps one of the marks of great art that it can absorb such an inundation of critical attention and still live for the reader. This study seeks to achieve a fresh perspective on these two major Victorian novelists by following up in a detailed and systematic analysis of some of their works the rhetorical approach to literature established by such critics as Wayne Booth and Sheldon Sacks. The focus in each case is on the author's personal vision of life and the technical means whereby it is transmitted to the reader. This thesis is based on a view of the literary work as an act of self-expression intended for an audience and as a representation of an individual apprehension of reality. I am, then, primarily concerned with the effect of the work, with its impact (intended or unintended) upon the reader rather than with its intrinsic, self-contained structure.
The three major factors in the rhetorical equation are obviously the author, the work, and the reader. In analyzing particular novels I have sought to define and discriminate between the variable relationships existing in George Eliot and Thomas Hardy between author and fictional characters, between reader and characters, and between author (as embodied in or speaking through his work) and reader. To a limited extent, I have attempted, through the use of contemporary reviews, to place these relationships in some historical perspective, though primarily concerned with the way the novels strike the reader today. As for technical analysis, I have concentrated mainly on the rhetorical handling of plot and point of view with little attention given to style and imagery except as they are subsumed under the subject of point of view.

I am happy to have this opportunity to acknowledge my considerable indebtedness to my supervisors in the English Department at the University of Otago - to Professor E.A. Horsman for his guidance and consideration at an early stage when it was intended to include Dickens along with George Eliot and Hardy in this study; and especially to Dr. L.O. Jones for his careful, patient criticism of each draft as it painfully emerged chapter by chapter, and for years of stimulating teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I would also like to thank the Master and Council of Knox College, Dunedin, for tangible and intangible sustenance without which this point might never have been reached.
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Bibliography
1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Stated most broadly, this thesis attempts to answer the question, 'What are George Eliot's and Thomas Hardy's views of life, and how are their views embodied in specific novels?' The term that simply cries out for definition is 'view of life'; that phrase is as wide as the novel itself. I am not presenting a compendium of all the multifarious beliefs and opinions that can be elicited from each of these novels with their abundance of created life (what was George Eliot's view of marriage or Hardy's attitude to encroaching mechanization), although many of these attitudes do emerge in the course of discussion. Nor am I attempting a thoroughgoing and systematic analysis of each author's formal philosophy (this type of study has been ably carried out by Bernard J. Paris on George Eliot and by Harvey C. Webster on Hardy), though something of both the conscious philosophy of life and the theory of fiction of each novelist is sketched in to provide a framework for the examination of particular works. The view of life mediated by a novel is something much less abstract and more alive than a collection of opinions or a comprehensive intellectual system.

'I believe,' wrote Virginia Woolf in 1924, 'that it is to express character ... that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved.'

1 See Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values (Detroit, 1965) and On a Dorling Plain: The Art and Thought of Thomas Hardy (Chicago, 1947).

remains the novel's *raison d'être*, even though the concept of character has undergone some startling redefinitions (not least in the novels of Virginia Woolf) since the Victorian era. But it is not simply the characters in themselves that matter. What the novel provides is first and foremost a number of characters *as seen by the author*. The people in Hardy are inseparable from his brooding apprehension of their doomed humanity, and in George Eliot from the firmly critical, though sympathetic, regard in which they are held. If character is central to a novel's life, then character judgements are central to its meaning; for, as Sheldon Sacks argues, 'a novelist not merely may but must subtly control our feelings about the characters, acts, and thoughts represented at each stage of the novel if it is to have a coherent effect.'

We discover what the effect of a particular novel is intended to be by studying the author's evaluation of the characters; what the effect of the novel actually is depends upon the extent to which the reader's estimation concurs with the author's. That is, not only must the novelist make his value judgements clear, he must also work to win the reader's acquiescence in those judgements, since serious disagreement defeats his artistic aims. Thus, as Wayne C. Booth has demonstrated, the novelist is inevitably a

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3 *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 65. My indebtedness to this book is considerable - not in terms of specific judgements but of general approach. Much of the inspiration of this thesis stems from Sacks's demonstration of the notion that 'the novelist's beliefs, opinions, and prejudices are expressed in the judgements he conveys of his characters, their actions, and their thoughts' (66).
rhetorician, committed to the art of persuasion. 

The novelist is intent upon presenting a vision of life that cannot be embraced by logical formulations, one that involves imaginative, intuitive apprehension. Unlike the philosophical treatise, the novel is an endeavour to present an immediate experience of life, not detached rationalizations about it. From that experience, as from life, the reader can abstract a number of conceptual statements, or 'themes,' even though the novel, unlike allegory, does not exist for the sake of the themes (it is the experience not the ideas implicit in it that dominates). As has been suggested, the novel's thematic burden emerges primarily through the author's judgements of his characters.

The novel forces an author to reveal his attitudes and commitments in an especially full and detailed way - in a much fuller, more detailed way than any other literary form requires - because he must order and evaluate all the wide diversity of human experience the novel contains in order to present a coherent vision. Inescapably he conveys not just a general estimate of each character but distinct reactions to their specific deeds and motives at every point in the plot. The novelist therefore expresses a more intimate and comprehensive (though less systematic) view of life than the philosopher, the historian, or the theologian, and usually a more comprehensive and more representative view than the poet or the dramatist. This

*See The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), especially Chs. i-iv. This impressive book must surely rank as one of the classics of modern criticism, and no student of the novel can help but be in its debt.*
necessary degree of authorial self-revelation has been noted by Sheldon Sacks who remarks:

A number of novelists have commented on the fact that readers of their novels sometimes act as if they knew them personally by virtue of having read their novels. This is not surprising. When we have read a good novelist's work it is as if we have had an opportunity to hear him speak to us of his beliefs and also have been able to observe for years how in fact he reacts to people we have been allowed to know performing actions whose motives have been made comprehensible to us for ends with which we sympathize or which we dislike. 5

In more precise terms, then, this study examines particular character estimates in George Eliot and Thomas Hardy in relation to the author's moral outlook and narrative technique. In other words, it seeks to discover the extent to which general values are reflected in specific judgements and how those judgements are communicated to the reader. Each author is considered independently; there is here no attempt at a systematic comparison, though cross-references are made at various points where these help define or illumine the practice of the particular novelist under discussion.

To a modern reader it is at once amazing and, to a degree, understandable that a prominent reviewer should have taken the first instalment of *Far from the Madding Crowd* to be by George Eliot. 6 When we move from the novels of George Eliot to those of Hardy there is a sharp sense of transition; we have passed from one distinct 'world' to another. Yet the differences are all the more intriguing in light of the many factors that place the two together.

5 *op. cit.*, pp. 271-2.

6 The reviewer, probably R.H. Hutton, wrote in the *Spectator* (3 January 1874), 'If *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not written by George Eliot, then there is a new light among novelists.' See R.L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (London, 1954), pp. 16-17.
Hardy and Eliot stand apart from the other major English novelists of the nineteenth century in the heterodoxy of their beliefs. Both rejected their early Christian faith (George Eliot's that of low church evangelicalism, Hardy's that of high Anglicanism) under the impact of the 'higher criticism' of German biblical scholars and the rationalism of such thinkers as Schopenhauer, Comte, Mill, Darwin, Spencer, Huxley and Leslie Stephen. The consequent pressing need to find some moral order in an indifferent, non-providential world gives their fiction a radical quality quite lacking in Dickens, Thackeray, or Trollope, who do not question the foundations of conventional beliefs - though they do attack the hypocrisy with which they are upheld. Simply the fact that they were abreast of current intellectual developments distinguishes George Eliot and Hardy from the non-philosophical Dickens and Thackeray. Of the two, George Eliot has very much the finer mind, while Hardy exhibits a richer, more intense imagination.

Along with their intellectual radicalism, George Eliot and Hardy, like many English thinkers, exhibit an emotional conservatism. Through the fiction of each there runs a strongly nostalgic strain, a deep attachment to the vanishing patterns of existence in simple rural communities. With George Eliot the nostalgia is more the product of personal deracination, so that she is not as pessimistic about 'progress' as is Hardy, who laments the passing of a whole way of life. Nevertheless, they share a reverence for tradition that provides them with a critical stance for judging the innovations of modernity.

Closely allied to this habit of mind is their devotion to the
lives of humble, insignificant people. The moral basis of their fiction is a conviction of the dignity and worth of the common man. In each a similar weight is placed upon the values of altruism, fellow-feeling, harmony with the natural environment, and the acceptance of one's insignificance in the total scheme of things. But, as we shall see, their reactions to those who fail in these virtues differ markedly.

Both take a more serious view of the place and function of the novelist's art than many of their contemporaries, though Hardy, in particular, was forced to bend to the pressures of conventionality. Both were very much concerned with the moral impact of their work and of literature in general. Interestingly, they attacked the didactic and dogmatic novel on moral not aesthetic grounds, and in almost the same terms. 'It may seem something of a paradox,' wrote Hardy, 'to assert that the novels which most conduce to moral profit are likely to be among those written without a moral purpose.' And George Eliot questioned 'whether the direct exhibition of a moral bias in the writer will make a book really moral in its influence.' George Eliot and Hardy, alike, were deeply concerned with the verisimilitude of their art, with fidelity to the complexity of life as they knew it.


9 This is not to suggest that they work on identical levels of reality. As we shall see later, Hardy's aesthetic gives less weight to surface realism than does George Eliot's.
At the same time they were intent upon fronting out the essentials of life, on delving to universal truths. It is their success in reconciling the demands of transient and eternal, particular and universal, that gives their fiction its lasting stature and contemporary value.

But if these similar values and concerns make it natural (and profitable) to consider George Eliot and Thomas Hardy together, the differences between them are so various and complex as to emerge adequately only through a detailed study of their individual works. Their individuality is such that comparison and contrast goes only a limited way in revealing the essential character of each.

One further element in which the two novelists demonstrate diversity in unity is that of technique. Both use the omniscient point of view, yet this fact but serves to emphasize the great variety of narrative methods that are usually blandly subsumed under that blanket phrase. Until recently twentieth-century criticism tended to see real craftsmanship in the novel form as not beginning till the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of James and Conrad. The new self-awareness that these writers brought to the novelist's craft led to a bias against the omniscient technique (with its associated authorial commentary) of the Victorian giants. A dominant theme in criticism was the necessary effacement of the author in order to preserve the 'illusion of reality' and the novelist's objectivity. Probably the definitive answer to this school of thought has been provided by Wayne C. Booth who, in The Rhetoric of Fiction, has shown that complete effacement of the author is neither possible nor desirable; authorial neutrality or objectivity is just as lacking in twentieth-century, non-
omniscient fiction as it was in the novels of Fielding, Dickens, George Eliot or Hardy.

However, one aspect of this call for neutrality demands further comment. Some critics attack the omniscient narrator for judging characters instead of leaving the reader to make up his own mind. For instance, Dorothy Van Ghent writes of Adam Bede, 'the "omniscient" point of view allows the author to load the dice against Hetty in such a way that we become uncomfortably conscious that we are not being given the opportunity to make up our own minds but are having a parti pris forced upon us.'10 What such critics fail to recognise is that the author's judgement does not preclude the reader's judgement. The reader is presented with the dramatically-realized portrait of a character as well as the author's evaluation of that character. On the basis of the dramatic portrait the reader may make a different evaluation - then so much the worse for the author.

It must be added, though, that the author can 'load the dice' against a character - by attributing to him deeds that are not 'in character' in order to damn him.11 There are grounds for arguing that Thackeray, for instance, does this with Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair: her mistreatment of young Rawdon is quite out of keeping with her characteristic good humour. But this kind of dice-loading can be carried out by any author: it is not a danger to which the omniscient novel is peculiarly susceptible. As Wayne Booth comments, the 'impression that the author


11 If this is the point Mrs Van Ghent is making about Adam Bede her criticism is perhaps valid. But it seems to me she is not criticising George Eliot's attitude to Hetty (which is open to criticism) so much as the fact that she judges her at all.
has weighed his characters on dishonest scales....depends not on whether the author explicitly passes judgement but on whether the judgement he passes seems defensible in the light of the dramatized facts.'

Authorial omniscience has come under attack this century on philosophical as well as aesthetic grounds. Typical of this critical position are the assertions of Scholes and Kellogg that 'the authoritarian monism of the fully omniscient mode of narration has become less and less tenable in modern times,' and that 'In an age of relativity the absolute posture of omniscience is likely to succeed only in a deliberately anachronistic work like The Sot-Weed Factor, or in works which otherwise abandon the novel's traditional empirical and representation-al predilections.' Jean Paul Sartre, in his famous attack on François Mauriac, united the aesthetic and philosophical objections to the mode:

Like most of our writers, he has tried to ignore the fact that the theory of relativity applies in full to the universe of fiction, that there is no more place for a privileged observer in a real novel than in the world of Einstein.... M. Mauriac has... chosen divine omniscience and omnipotence. But novels are written by men and for men. In the eyes of God, Who cuts through appearances and goes beyond them, there is no novel, no art, for art thrives on appearances. God is not an artist. Neither is M. Mauriac. 

This insistence on the relativity of all values is, of course, indicative of a contemporary loss of faith. But, though the novelist has a responsibility to reality, it is a responsibility to reality as he sees it. To a greater or lesser degree, every writer is influenced by the atti-

tudes of the society and age in which he finds himself, but his vision is primarily a personal one, his work the expression of a distinctive, idiosyncratic outlook. George Eliot and Thomas Hardy were both decisively influenced by the growing scepticism of the time, but their outlooks are far apart. Eliot found assurance in a positivistic 'Religion of Humanity,' while Hardy lived out his days in stoic pessimism. Dickens and Thackeray, by further contrast, continued to write within the context of traditional belief. To deny the validity of their vision is to make relativism itself a paradoxical form of absolutism.

Furthermore, such rigid insistence on relativism denies the very basis of art. Not only is art the expression of a personal vision, it is also a selected, ordered view of life. In the world of the novelist all the baffling, seemingly inconsequential details of experience take on a new meaning and significance. Without such selection and ordering coherent art is impossible. Great art (as witness Shakespeare) thrives not on appearances but on the discrepancy between appearances and reality. God is, in fact, the supreme artist. The very life blood of omniscient novelists like Hardy and George Eliot is their revelation of the ironic discrepancies between what people are in themselves and the way others judge them, between human aspirations and their realization, between the world as men think it is arranged and the way it actually operates. Novels are written 'by men for men,' but by men of heightened awareness who cut through appearances for men of duller insight.

There has been a more radical, recent attack on the nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. Bernard J. Faris argues that
If ... the novelist has an obligation to plumb to universal values and to make his moral orderings clear, then he will usually fail; for as an interpreter of experience the novelist is usually no wiser or more consistent than other men. The real trouble with the narrative technique of much nineteenth-century fiction is that the implied author as interpreter usually does not know what he is talking about. 15

This statement raises the wide theoretical question of whether or not the interpretative and evaluative is an essential or even viable element of realistic fiction. There is not space to deal adequately with that issue here, and I have already indicated briefly why I think evaluation is essential to the successful work. However, rightly or wrongly, authorial evaluation is a part of the novels of George Eliot and Hardy, and the body of this thesis examines the validity in their case of Paris's stricture. Is the narrative technique employed by these novelists adequate to its task? Are their authorial judgements consistent with their representation of life? Are failures in judgement due to the failure of technique or to inadequate authorial values? These are the sorts of issues that have to be confronted in analyzing specific novels. For Paris is quite right in arguing that an author who does judge must convince us that his value judgements are valid, or else the work fails. Unless the value judgements are in accord with the dramatized reality the novel will be disunified. Thus a consideration of moral values is inescapable in estimating the artistic success of a work.

I have argued that all novelists give themselves away in disclosing (consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly) attitudes towards their characters. The demands of the omniscient novel are espec-

15 "Form, Theme, and Imitation in Realistic Fiction," *Novel*, I (Winter 1968), 146.
ially great because the author's moral commitments appear more explicitly. In first-person narratives, the author can hide behind a shield of irony directed at the narrator, disguising his own deficiencies by making few positive commitments. Occasionally, it is true, an omniscient novel of almost indiscriminate cynicism appears—as witness *Vanity Fair*; but this is only possible when the author peoples his world exclusively with knaves and fools.

Since the omniscient narrator is such an apparent part of his own creation, the success of the novel depends greatly upon his qualities of mind and character. As Wayne Booth remarks, 'An author who intrudes must somehow be interesting; he must live as a character. And in hundreds of works from Fielding to the present, dull minds have produced dull spokesmen who emphasize their dullness by claiming to be brilliant.' But the 'intruding' author must be more than interesting; his comments must be consistent, just, and relevant, as well as lively and imaginative. We spurn commentary that is illogical or trite, commentary that is biased, insensitive or sentimental, commentary that is superfluous to the dramatized world of the novel (though relevance in this sense must be widely interpreted). In short, the sum of the author's artistic, intellectual, moral, and emotional qualities determines the stature of his commentary. And not of the commentary alone. If we cannot respect the author in his explicit judgements, we are not likely to be sympathetically disposed towards the whole work. For, as Booth has shown, the 'implied author' is the whole work; the work is the sum of the dramatic and

rhetorical means whereby he is realized. For this reason, 'it is not what a great writer has shown us he believes that matters, it is what he is and how his work reflects his being that counts.' Hopefully, something of the essential character of the implied author in the novels of George Eliot and Hardy, a sense of each being as well as his beliefs, will emerge in the following chapters.

However, it is impossible to consider in any one novel all the formal devices by which the author's character is conveyed. This thesis is an attempt to examine sufficient technical devices to reveal the central pattern of judgement in each novel. Since criticism is by nature schematic, no critical analysis can do justice to the work of fiction; each reading will emphasize different strands in the overall texture to the neglect of others. This study, by concentrating on the protagonists, tends to underplay the importance of Clym Yeobright in The Return of the Native, of Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, of Tom Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss, and of several characters in Middlemarch. The concern has been to discover the centre of the author's imaginative and moral commitments rather than to trace their ramifications to the peripheries of each fictional world.

The examination of particular novels concentrates, too, on what seem to me to be the major critical problems of those novels: the ambiguity in the portrait of Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native; the apparent loss of perspective on Maggie Tulliver and the associated

17 See The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp. 70-75, for an outline of the 'implied author' concept.
problems of the ending in The Mill on the Floss; in Tess the success of Hardy's thesis that his heroine is 'A Pure Woman'; in Middlemarch the supposed idealization of Ladislaw and Dorothea. This may appear to have resulted in a negative emphasis upon faults rather than merits. In so far as this is so, it is indicative of a feeling that the essential strengths and successes of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy have been well elucidated by a host of critics, and that the main function of further criticism is to define the limits of that success. Unfortunately, criticism often seems better able to analyze the flaws than to explain the successes of literary creation. Past a certain point, the critic faced with great art can only accept it with humble gratitude. Critical analysis is too coarse an instrument to convey the living essence; it can only point a reader on his way. But it is in the service of such timeless art as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy achieve that criticism finds its justification.

Finally, a word of explanation is required. Hardy is dealt with before George Eliot because this order facilitates the sort of comparative evaluations I wish to make. This is not to suggest that George Eliot is consistently better than Hardy or that the novels discussed are arranged in ascending order of merit, though it is true that the thesis ends with the most successful of the four. Since this study is not concerned to trace influences from one novelist to the other but regards their works as discrete, self-contained achievements, it seemed not improper to treat them in non-chronological order.
PART I

THOMAS HARDY
2. THOMAS HARDY: INTRODUCTORY

At first sight Hardy's overt attitude towards fiction is rather disconcerting. After receiving a copy of Joseph Warren Beach's book, The Technique of Thomas Hardy, he is reported to have commented, 'There isn't any technique about prose, is there? It just comes along of itself.'\(^1\) Earlier in his life, while still actively engaged in novel-writing, he referred to his craft as 'mere journeywork,' and claimed his ambition as a novelist was 'merely to be considered a good hand at a serial.'\(^2\) Such disparaging remarks were accompanied by a seemingly life-long conviction that poetry was his true vocation, and a marked concern with commercial considerations in novel-writing. The pressures of serial publication find him at times - most notably in Tess of the d'Urbervilles - making a reluctant but (in his own words) 'unceremonious concession to conventionality.'\(^3\) Hence it is not altogether surprising that many critics have denied Hardy as novelist the status and consideration of the serious artist. Until quite recently, Albert J. Guerard's was a fairly representative judgement: 'this is the conclusion to which we are driven - that Hardy was a great popular novelist and not a great deliberate artist.'\(^4\)

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3 Early Life, p.291.

4 Thomas Hardy, the Novels and Stories (New York, 1949), p.157.
But, although Hardy's attitude towards his craft was at times less serious than one could wish, it is a gross distortion to suggest (as some critics have done) that he was unconscious of technique in his approach to fiction, or that he merely stumbled upon greatness while intent on catering for the popular appetite. The evidence contradicts Hardy's retrospective assertions that he was driven to fiction by pecuniary need, and the revisions he carried out, even after he had ceased to write novels, indicate his deep concern for his art. Many of the comments in his notebooks and journals show a keen awareness of and interest in the author's role in shaping his materials, in the working of the personal idiosyncrasies on the objective facts of life. In a journal entry for Easter Sunday 1885, Hardy comments on the evidence of art in biblical narratives:

They are written with a watchful attention (though disguised) as to their effect on their reader. Their so-called simplicity is, in fact, the simplicity of the highest cunning. And one is led to inquire, when even in these latter days artistic development and arrangement are the qualities least appreciated by readers, who was there likely to appreciate the art in these chronicles at that day?

Looking round on a well-selected shelf of fiction or history, how few stories of any length does one recognize as well told from beginning to end! The first half of this story, the last half of that, the middle of another .... The modern art of narration is yet in its infancy.

But in these Bible lives and adventures there is the spherical completeness of perfect art. And our first, and second, feeling that they must be true because they are so impressive, becomes, as a third feeling, modified to, 'Are they so very true, after all?' Is not the fact of their being so convincing an argument, not for their actuality, but for the actuality of a consummate artist who was no more content with what Nature offered than Sophocles and Pheidias were content?6


6 Early Life, pp.222-3.
This excerpt is quoted at length because it reveals several important aspects of Hardy's literary theory that are relevant to an understanding of his practice. Firstly, although Hardy certainly lacked the literary sophistication of Flaubert or James, he was not totally oblivious to the values of formal balance and symmetry, 'the spherical completeness of perfect art.' In one of his few essays on fiction, Hardy comments at some length on the desirable (and often lacking) 'structural quality' of narratives, on the pleasure derived from 'a beauty of shape,' outlining as his criterion a notion of organic form derived from Addison.7

More importantly, the passage shows that Hardy thought of narrative technique largely in rhetorical terms. That is, the author's art is not regarded as being there for its own sake, to create a beautiful objet d'art, but as totally directed towards the reader; it is employed primarily in order to evoke a particular response. The true artist, then, is always writing with a calculating eye, 'a watchful attention,' upon the effect his narrative is likely to have upon his audience. In Hardy's novels his rhetorical concerns predominate, often at the expense of that 'structural quality' which he sees as a secondary virtue. His technical resources are primarily aimed at evoking a strongly sympathetic reaction to his characters, and sometimes, in striving for this effect, he upsets the artistic balance of his work - either by illogical or excessive use of commentary (as in his at times almost desperate efforts to vindicate Tess) or by overly-complex

7 "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," in Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orde (London, 1967), pp.120-2. Hardy later praised Anatole France for his recognition of 'the value of organic form and symmetry' at a time 'when the literature of narrative and verse seems to be losing its qualities as an art, and to be assuming a structureless and conglomerate character' (Later Years, p.159).
and improbable plotting (often a stumbling block in The Return of the Native).

This notebook entry also shows Hardy's awareness of the potential conflict between the author's rhetorical interests and truth to life. He sees that the artist may alter nature for his own ends, but that in so doing he runs the risk of destroying the illusion of reality, of provoking the sceptical query, 'Is this so very true, after all?' This tension between his pragmatic and mimetic impulses is central to Hardy's own work, and one which he never permanently resolved. Even in his most successful novels, like Tess, where the balance is best maintained, Hardy occasionally sacrifices verisimilitude to pathos. It is necessary at this stage, however, to consider just what sort of verisimilitude or 'truth to life' Hardy in fact sought to achieve.

II

One of the most recurrent themes in Hardy's notes on literary theory is his rebellion against the dogma of the naturalists, like Zola, who thought literature should keep as close as possible to the surface details of life, and aspire to something of the precision of observation of the natural sciences. To Hardy this was a complete contradiction of the true nature and value of art. Unlike George Eliot, who thought the writer should be as objective as possible, and who regarded unavoidable subjectivity as a lamentable flaw in the mirror held up to nature, Hardy regarded the individual vision of the artist as the essential source of value in fiction. Indeed, without it, fiction was not fiction at all. In "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" he comments on 'the assumption that a novel is the thing,
and not a view of the thing':

It forgets that the characters, however they may differ, express mainly the author, his largeness of heart or otherwise, his culture, his insight, and very little of any other living person ... and would take the narrative out of the category of fiction; i.e., verbatim reporting without selective judgement.8

Hardy sees the true artist, or 'seer,' as trying to give expression to his quite personal, 'idiosyncratic' outlook:

As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.

And again: 'Art consists in so depicting the common events of life as to bring out the features which illustrate the author's idiosyncratic mode of regard; making old incidents and things seem as new.'9

In order to give full expression to his distinctive 'mode of regard,' the author must select and manipulate the raw materials of life.

Art is a changing of the actual proportions and order of things, so as to bring out more forcibly than might otherwise be done that feature in them which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist.

Alternatively,

Art is a disproportioning - (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) - of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art.10

These two notes clearly indicate that, for Hardy, the feature 'which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist' and the 'features that matter' are one and the same. Thus, though rejecting surface realism as

8 Personal Writings, p.124.
9 Early Life, pp.198, 294.
10 Ibid., p.299.
oppressive and more germane to journalism than to fiction, Hardy does not see himself as thereby falsifying life. On the contrary, he has a romantic's faith in the ability of the individual artist's imagination to reveal a truer, more essential order of reality underlying externals. The author's selection and reordering of life is done 'with an eye to being more truthful than truth (the just aim of Art).'' The result is that 'the best fiction, like the highest artistic expression in other modes, is more true, so to put it, than history or nature can be.' This truth is a truth as to the inner nature of things. 'My art,' writes Hardy, 'is to intensify the expression of things ... so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible.'

But even in its fidelity to inner truth, fiction could not wholly deny the claims of surface realism. Hardy repudiates the didactic novel as 'so generally devoid of vraisemblance as to teach nothing but the impossibility of tampering with natural truth to advance dogmatic opinions.' He warns readers against a failure 'to understand that attention to accessories has its virtues when the nature of its regard does not involve blindness to higher things; still more when it conduces to the elucidation of higher things.' And he wanted to disassociate the work of the imagination from a fanciful creation, a mere 'invention': what the imagination reveals 'by seeing into the heart of a thing ... is realism, in fact, though through being pursued by the means of the imagination it is confounded

12 "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," Personal Writings, p.117.
13 Early Life, pp.231-2.
14 "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," Personal Writings, p.118.
15 Ibid., p.119.
with invention, which is pursued by the same means.' Still, it was the inner reality that was Hardy's chief concern and which determined his whole literary style, including his presentation of the natural world.

I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don't want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don't want to see the original realities - as optical effects that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings.

The "simply natural" is interesting no longer. The much decried, mad, late-Turner rendering is now necessary to create my interest. The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art - it is a student's style - the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there, - half hidden, it may be - and the two united are depicted as the All.17

This, then, is how Hardy's fiction relates to life. His art neither totally disregards 'material fact;' nor is wholly subservient to it; instead it is a translation of the qualities 'that are already there,' albeit hidden from the 'unawakened' mind. Hardy's rebellion against the realism or 'copyism' of the naturalists was not an absolute denial of their aesthetic, but a desire to extend the concept of 'realism' beyond a literal-minded preoccupation with the material to a concern with what he considered were universal truths implicit within material appearances.

16 Early Life, p.190.
17 Ibid., pp.242-3.
III

In Hardy's work, this attention to a subjective inner reality reveals itself in a number of ways. It is apparent, firstly, in the use of setting. Consider, for example, this passage from the description of Talbothay's dairy in *Tess*:

Long thatched sheds stretched round the enclosure, their slopes encrusted with vivid green moss, and their eaves supported by wooden posts rubbed to a glossy smoothness by the flanks of infinite cows and calves of bygone years, now passed to an oblivion almost inconceivable in its profundity. Between the posts were ranged the milchers, each exhibiting herself at the present moment to a whimsical eye in the rear as a circle on two stalks, down the centre of which a switch moved pendulum-wise; while the sun, lowering itself behind this patient row, threw their shadows accurately inwards upon the wall. Thus it threw shadows of these obscure and homely figures every evening with as much care over each contour as if it had been the profile of a Court beauty on a palace wall; copied them as diligently as it had copied Olympian shapes on marble facades long ago, or the outline of Alexander, Caesar, and the Pharaohs.

18 Though it would be highly convenient, it does not seem possible to provide a satisfactory single tag for Hardy's 'idiosyncratic mode of regard.' A.J.Guerard (op.cit.) has employed the term 'anti-realism' in discussing Hardy in terms of conflicting impulses to realism and anti-realism; but this label seems misleading since Hardy considered his subjective art not as opposed to realism, but as portraying a more essential realism. Terms such as 'symbolism,' 'impressionism,' and 'romanticism' have a certain validity when applied to Hardy, but are either not wholly applicable or too vague and general to be of much use. Irving Howe's seems an accurate assessment: 'In most of his important novels Hardy was a writer struggling towards expressionist and symbolist fiction at a time when the only tradition immediately available to him was the conventional realism of the nineteenth century' (*Thomas Hardy [London, 1966], p.61*). Frederick R.Karl attempts to have it both ways by terming Hardy's art 'symbolic realism' ("Thomas Hardy's Mayor and the Changing Novel," in *A Reader's Guide to the Nineteenth Century British Novel* [New York, 1965], p.296).

19 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, p.89. All references are to the Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1965), ed. Scott Elledge, and are hereafter inserted parenthetically in the text.
There is no pretention to objectivity here, no attempt at photographic accuracy. The view is that of a quite distinctive and active mind at work on the scene, not of a passive recorder. Occasionally the picture created is merely 'whimsical,' as when a cow from the rear is seen as a circle on two stalks. Sometimes this leads to an indulgence in the odd and grotesque for its own sake — as with the heart-shaped blood stain in the ceiling after the murder of Alec d'Urberville. Usually, though, it is Hardy's serious thematic concerns which dominate the visual scene. So, in the above quotation, Hardy uses the appearance of the sheds to evoke an infinite historical perspective in which individual lives are as insignificant as grains of sand on the sea shore. And the care with which the sun draws the shadows of the milchers is used to illustrate another characteristic Hardy theme, that of the indifference of nature to human values; the profile of a Court beauty or a famous marble bust would be outlined no more accurately by the sun than that of a cow.

Often even the seemingly whimsical has a haunting, indefinable power that is an essential part of Hardy's quite unique vision:

Skirting the pool she followed the path towards Rainbarrow, occasionally stumbling over twisted furze-roots, tufts of rushes, or oozing lumps of fleshy fungi, which at this season lay scattered about the heath like the rotten liver and lungs of some colossal animal.20

This appalling image of general death and decay is strangely apt as Eustacia moves over the desolate heath to her own death.

Sometimes, as in the above scene from Tess, Hardy comments on his scene to bring out those features that demonstrate his 'idiosyncratic mode of regard.' But commentary is not always needed; some scenes achieve

20 The Return of the Native, p.359. All references are to the Macmillan Papermac Edition (London, 1965), and are hereafter inserted in the text.
the self-sufficiency of true symbolism. The memorable scene of the death of the Durbeyfield horse early in Tess seems to contain the whole tragedy in miniature. The morning mail-cart speeding along the lanes on 'noiseless wheels' is a potent image of the swift, silent Fate that moves unconsciously but surely towards Tess's destruction. Having fallen asleep, Tess is oblivious of the disaster bearing down upon her; so in her innocence before Alec, her child-like trust in Angel, and her generally unforfending approach to life, misfortune overtakes her with crushing unexpect- edness. For Tess, disaster always seems to come with this brutal and ironic suddenness: "Why, I danced and laughed only yesterday!" she went on to herself. "To think that I was such a fool!"(27). The darkness of the night and the easily extinguished lantern suggest the benighted state of man on this 'blighted star,' a view which so much else in the novel goes to support. Tess's utter helplessness and her one futile gesture ('In her despair Tess sprang forward and put her hand upon the hole, with the only result that she became splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops') mirror her future powerlessness to avert her doom, while the splashes of blood prefigure its final form. Even the horse, Prince, evokes something of Hardy's larger vision of suffering, and of man's (and animals') courageous, but pathetically doomed, resistance: 'Prince also stood firm and motionless as long as he could; till he suddenly sank down in a heap'(27). As Tess awaits help after the departure of the mailcart the scene starkly embodies Hardy's view of nature's relation to man.

The atmosphere turned pale, the birds shook themselves in the hedges, arose, and twittered; the lane showed all its white features, and Tess showed hers, still whiter. The huge pool of blood in front of her was already assuming the iridescence of coagulation; and when the sun rose a hundred prismatic hues were reflected from it. Prince lay alongside still and stark; his eyes half open, the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him. (27)
As Dorothy Van Ghent remarks, we are here made aware of the oblivious manifold of nature stretching infinite and detached beyond the isolated human figure; the iridescence of the coagulating blood is, in its incongruity with the dark human trouble, a note of the same indifferent cosmic chemistry that has brought about the accident.\textsuperscript{21} This awareness comes directly from the description of the scene without the need for authorial commentary to draw an analogy or to outline the implications of what is there. The larger meanings that the image invokes are inherent in its concrete particularity, for the scene is what it suggests. The accident is not merely a metaphor of the fate that overtakes Tess, but is an essential item in the whole causally-linked process begun by Parson Tringham's discovery and resulting in Tess's disastrous attempt to 'claim kin' of the d'Urbervilles. Coleridge's definition of symbolism seems perfectly applicable here: a symbol, as distinct from other tropes, 'partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible.'\textsuperscript{22}

Not all the scenes in Tess have quite this degree of symbolic suggestiveness; but most have the same detailed particularity coupled with a significance that goes beyond the specific details. The harsh, bleak landscape at Flintcomb-Ash reflects the emotional desolation of Tess's life following her rejection by Clare, just as the rich sensuousness of spring in the fertile Froom mirrors the resurgence of life and hope in Tess after her first misfortune. Such settings objectify Tess's inner

\textsuperscript{21} The English Novel: Form and Function (New York, 1953), Harper Torchbook Edition, pp.198-9. My debt to Mrs. Van Ghent's brilliant commentary on this incident will also be apparent in one or two of the foregoing remarks.

life, yet can scarcely be called symbolic — they have too much independent life of their own, and are as much causal agents as metaphors. Here Hardy's art hovers indefinably between naturalism and symbolism. Hardy has managed to convey 'the deeper reality underlying the scenic' and at the same time maintain complete fidelity to observed fact. It is true that 'often in Hardy, verisimilitude is subordinated to internal pressures of theme and vision,' but here internal pressures and external verisimilitude are perfectly in accord.

In The Return of the Native, there is the same primary concern for the underlying reality, yet oftent without the powerful actuality of setting which, as Dorothy Van Ghent observes, gives the 'symbolism' in Tess a secure foundation in concrete fact. Despite the magnificent evocation of the sounds of the heath, Egdon is not nearly so intensely visualized as, Flintcomb-Ash or Talbothays. This is perhaps why the once much-lauded opening description of the heath is, to modern taste, stagy and pretentious. Throughout the novel, Hardy is more concerned with the atmosphere than the appearance of the heath; he has eschewed 'landscapes' as 'scenic paintings.' He uses setting in an attempt to create a grand sombre backdrop to heighten the tragic mood of the action. Heightened rhetoric and evocative associations of night, wildness, and storms are employed to build atmosphere; but the associations are too often alleged without springing naturally from the scene:

23 Irving Howe, p.86.
24 See The English Novel, p.201.
It was a night which led the traveller's thoughts instinctively to dwell on nocturnal scenes of disaster in the chronicles of the world, on all that is terrible and dark in history and legend— the last plague of Egypt, the destruction of Sennacherib's host, the agony in Gethsemane. (359)

The description is often too generalized, asserting rather than conveying the heath's qualities—'majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity' (12).

But if the presentation of Egdon seems at times rather forced, it does show clearly that Hardy is not interested in setting merely for its 'optical effects' but for its emotive and thematic connotations. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy attempts to give setting a symbolic value in a more systematic manner and on a much more comprehensive scale than in *Tess*. Egdon Heath is intended to symbolize the general conditions of human existence; it is designed as a microcosm of the modern world as Hardy sees it.²⁵ In its 'sombreness' and 'swarthy monotony' (13) it is, in his view, a much more accurate reflection of the terms of life than 'smiling champagne of flowers and fruit' (12). But the symbolism is too abstract; it lacks the strong immediacy of the scene at Flintcomb-Ash which conveys Hardy's view of the bleakness and harshness of modern life much more vividly:

The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by the live-stock, and it was the business of the two women to grub up the lower or earthy half of the root with a hooked fork called a hacker, that it might be eaten also. Every leaf of the vegetable having already been consumed, the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour,

²⁵ This is to state the function of the heath in broadest terms. A more detailed discussion of the complex of ideas lying behind the setting occurs in the following chapter.
the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies. (237-8)

The success of this passage derives from the precision of observed detail; because the scene is so well visualised, the horrifying metaphors (the landscape and sky seen as featureless faces) and the 'image of diminution' (the two girls as flies on the blank visage) have compelling force. An added reason for the scene's effectiveness is that it is no set-piece, but is fully integrated into the plot. Likewise, the more particularized and 'integrated' passages on the heath - such as that describing the sound of the wind on the heath-bells (61) - are more successful than the opening chapter.

Hardy's concern to plumb to universal and eternal values in particulars also has a marked influence on his portrayal of character. Almost all of the people of the Wessex world are unsophisticated, simple figures, so drawn as to stress their representative quality rather than their personal idiosyncrasies. This was quite obviously Hardy's conscious intention. In the General Preface to the 1912 Wessex Edition he states that, despite the limitation of setting, 'the people in most of the novels ... were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place where

Thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool,
- beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal.'26 When Hardy did attempt to draw a complex, sophisticated character he failed. Most readers agree that Clym Yeobright

26 Personal Writings, p.46.
and Angel Clare are interesting conceptions that are never fully realised.

Generally, though, Hardy's characters are given a strictly limited number of traits. This allows their essential features to be seen with greater intensity and clarity. Irving Howe's statement on the characterization in *The Return of the Native* is valid for most of Hardy:

> The characterization is block-like, unshaded, monochromatic. Hardy reaches intuitively toward the few basic facts of human psychology and does not trouble to modulate or muddy them with psychological analysis. Usually his figures are in the grip of a single desire. Like figures in traditional romance or ballad, they are embodiments of a ruling passion, or like figures in modernist fiction, they are agents of a tyrannical obsession.27

Some figures, like Tess Durbeyfield, Michael Henchard, or Bathsheba Everdene, do, it is true, seem more complete individuals, but this is usually because of the intimacy with which we get to know them, not because they are varied and complex persons. Even Tess, whose individuality is triumphantly asserted throughout the novel, is a representative figure.

Tess feels this herself, though she tries to ignore it:

> '... what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only — finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'.'(107)

It may seem that Hardy's predominantly external presentation of character is at odds with the internality of vision that I have been attempting to trace through his statements of intent and actual achievement. But here, as with natural setting, the external and accidental is used as an index to the internal and essential. Though there is little psychological analysis of character (and what analysis there is lacks the finesse and

and subtlety of George Eliot's), his people are vividly realized and clearly revealed through their actions. Personalities like Angel Clare, for whom no consistent 'objective correlative' is found in action, rarely, if ever, comes alive in the reader's experience; \(^{28}\) characters like Gabriel Oak and Tess live in the memory precisely because they are so fully seen in action. Hardy's choice of action and concept of character are thus intimately related.

Hardy rebelled against the realist's penchant for portraying the minutiae of social manners because, for him, this obscured the universal truths of human nature, failing to distinguish truths which are temporary from truths which are eternal, the accidental from the essential, accuracies as to custom and ceremony from accuracies as to the perennial procedure of humanity. \(^{29}\) His adherence to simple characters and unrefined ways was the consequence of a belief that 'social refinement operates upon character in a way which is oftener than not prejudicial to vigorous portraiture, by making the exteriors of men their screen rather than their index, as with untutored mankind.' \(^{30}\) Rejecting the world of manners, Hardy creates, instead, a realm of intensified emotions and compressed experience where the lineaments of character are often captured in short symbolic tableaux of almost visionary power. Henchard taming the wild bull; Bathsheba admiring herself in the mirror atop the wagon; Troy's sword-drill; the blind Clym singing at his furze-cutting; Tess cowering before Alec on the wheat-rick - all these scenes distil something of the

\(^{28}\) A comparison with the relatively inactive Casaubon in Middlemarch reveals the markedly different order of Hardy's and George Eliot's characterization.

\(^{29}\) "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," Personal Writings, pp.113-9.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 124.
essence of character, and perhaps suggest more than Hardy was consciously aware of. All are part of the general heightening of Hardy's world, a world in which the melodramatic is a controlled and integrated element. This is not to suggest that Hardy never goes too far and indulges his love of the strange and extraordinary for its own sake. Even some integral symbolic sequences, like the sleep-walking in Tess, teeter parlously close to the brink of gross improbability and sentimentality. But more of this problem anon.

Though he uncovers the deep, primitive passions that are largely excluded from her world, the area of experience in Hardy's novels is more limited than in George Eliot's. His chief preoccupation, besides which all else sinks into secondary importance, is the subject of sexual love. In the Preface to The Woodlanders, Hardy declares his concern in that and other novels with 'the immortal puzzle - given the man and woman, how to find a basis for their sexual relation.' It is natural enough that the centrality of this theme should lead to frequent comparison between Hardy's fiction and that of D.H. Lawrence. In Hardy's view (a view no doubt coloured by his own marriage), sexual relations were not only central to man's life, but also almost invariably unhappy in result:

Life being a physiological fact, its honest portrayal must be largely concerned with, for one thing, the relation of the sexes, and the substitution for such catastrophes as favour the false colouring best expressed by the regulation finish that 'they married and were happy ever after,' of catastrophes based upon sexual relations as it is.31

Increasingly in his fiction Hardy comes to see sexuality as a destructive force that will not be denied. His earlier emphasis on rational control

gradually gives way to overwhelming sympathy with the tempted, the tormented - and the fallen.

In broader terms, action in Hardy, like character, focuses on the representative; it involves the archetypal conflicts of man and destiny. He was concerned, as he put it, with 'great dramatic motives - setting forth that "collision between the individual and the general" - formerly worked out with such force by the Periclean and Elizabethan dramatists.'

For Hardy the result of the collision between the individual and the general forces of his environment was inevitably tragic; the individual may resist the pressures of fate, but his struggle is doomed from the beginning; the individual must always conform to the general. This is the essential truth to which he sought to penetrate by eschewing the realist's 'exact truth as to material fact'; for Hardy, life always assumed a tragic aspect when 'the heart and inner meaning' is made plain. His heightened realism was, then, designed to reveal 'the tragical mysteries of life.'

On at least one occasion, Hardy suggested that his preoccupation with the darker side of life was merely the product of personal idiosyncrasy.

Differing natures find their tongue in the presence of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer's instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond. That before a contrasting side of things he remains undemonstrative need not be assumed to mean that he remains unperceiving.

However, more commonly, he tended to view his presentation of life as being a truthful reflection of the essential nature of things. In a letter to J.B. Priestley, he criticized Meredith for ignoring 'the tragedy that always

32 Ibid., pp. 126-7.
33 General Preface to the 1912 Wessex Edition, Personal Writings, p.49.
underlies Comedy if you "only scratch it deeply enough." To the charge that his writings were pessimistic, he replied:

It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics — which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. 35

Elsewhere he suggested that the method of fictional presentation most in accordance with the prevalent contemporary view of life "seems to be by a procedure mainly passive in its tone and tragic in its developments." 36

But just what were the 'tragical mysteries of life' that Hardy sought to portray in his fiction? First, it must be noted that Hardy himself did not claim to have a consistent, systematic philosophy of life; instead he repeatedly referred to the views of life presented in his works as mere 'impressions,' 37 even 'a confused heap of impressions, like those of a bewildered child at a conjuring show,' 38 and as 'seemings, provisional impressions only, used for artistic purposes because they represent approximately the impressions of the age, and are plausible, till somebody produces better theories of the universe.' 39 Nevertheless, however tentative his metaphysic, Hardy did work within a distinctive conceptual frame, and it is perhaps worthwhile to outline some of its features.

It is well known that Hardy in young adulthood lost his early Christian faith under the influence of the sceptical, rationalist thought of the day.

34 Later Years, p.257.
35 General Preface, Personal Writings, p.49.
36 "Candour in English Fiction," Personal Writings, p.126.
37 See, for instance, the Preface to the fifth edition of Tess and the Preface to the first edition of Jude the Obscure.
38 Later Years, p.219.
39 Ibid., p.175.
Thus the world of his novels is devoid of the presence of divine providence, of the beneficent power that is presupposed, if not always strongly felt, in Dickens' world. In a 1896 notebook entry, Hardy could make the confident assertion that '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.'40 The latter possibility was never (consciously) taken seriously by Hardy, though he sometimes wished it could be – then some satisfaction might be gained from stoic resistance and a sense of 'ire unmerited.'41 For him the cause of things was not malign, but quite indifferent to man, 'neither moral nor immoral, but immoral.'42 'The world,' he wrote at the age of 25, 'does not despise us; it only neglects us.'43 Still it is interesting that, while denying a providential order, Hardy was unable, unlike Conrad, to deny ultimate direction to the universe; he had to posit a controlling force, some principle in which all natural processes could be subsumed.

Just what this force was, and why it operated as it did, Hardy never very successfully explained. His most definitive formulation took place in *The Dynasts* where he introduced the conception of the 'Immanent Will,' an unconscious force of destiny pulsing through all things. But even this description was inadequate: in a letter to Edward Wright, he wrote, 'the word "Will" does not perfectly fit the idea to be conveyed – a vague thrusting or urging internal force in no predetermined direction.'44

40 Ibid., p.58.
43 *Early Life*, p.63.
44 *Later Years*, p.124.
Hardy was, of course, greatly influenced by Darwin and, as a result, there is a strong element of naturalism in his works. While unable to see Purpose in the scheme of things, he did lay considerable stress on the determined processes of natural law; but, like the naturalists, he could not present everything that took place in terms of observable cause and effect. The large element of unexplained chance which enters his plots seems, at least in part, the consequence of Hardy's need to preserve mystery in a mechanistic universe; but this problem is discussed more fully in the next chapter.

But if Hardy could not account for why things were as they were, or even fully explain how they came to be that way, he did have a definite and deep-seated conviction of what things were like for man. The central calamitous fact in Hardy's universe is that man has been given desires and needs which, in the nature of things, cannot be satisfied. For man, the world is grossly imperfect being unable to 'supply the materials for happiness to higher existences.' The tragic disparity between man's nature and his environment is the freakish consequence of uneven evolutionary development:

Law has produced in man a child who cannot but constantly reproach its parent for doing much and yet not all, and constantly say to such parent that it would have been better never to have begun doing than to have overdone so indecisively; that is, then to have created so far beyond all apparent first intention (on the emotional side), without mending matters by a second intent and execution, to eliminate the evils of the blunder of overdoing. The emotions

45 See William Newton, "Chance as Employed by Hardy and the Naturalists," Philological Quarterly, xxx (April 1951), pp.154-75, for a discussion of the greater significance given to chance in Hardy as compared with the naturalists.

46 Late in life, Hardy confessed himself 'utterly bewildered to understand how the doctrine that, beyond the knowable, there must always be an unknown, can be displaced' (Later Years, p.168).

47 Early Life, p.286.
have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it. 48

This situation can only result in human misery and frustrated hopes, with the compounded irony that it is the most thoughtful and sensitive characters who suffer most; the dull, unimaginative, and unambitious are reasonably content since they are oblivious of the true situation.

Not only is man in Hardy's world frustrated by his environment, he is also in large measure conditioned by it. The laws governing the natural world also work through man who, despite his aspirations, is inextricably tied to the scheme of nature. Thus he is subjected to the laws of time and change, and of sexual attraction, and must enter into the general struggle for survival along with lower forms of life. Since man is so largely determined by his heredity and environment, his degree of free will is slight, and he is not to be held fully responsible for his actions. Even the villains in Hardy are as much the victims of the forces of destiny as the commendable characters. In this Hardy differs from George Eliot, who also sees the area of human free will as limited, yet regards man as holding a significant degree of responsibility for his actions.

While Hardy is reluctant to ascribe responsibility to his characters, it would be misleading to suggest that he never judges them. The tremendous compassion he feels at the spectacle of human (or even non-human) suffering leads him, perhaps illogically, to judge those characters who cause others to suffer. In a world of such prevalent pain the golden rule

48 Ibid., p. 192.
is for Hardy the supreme and only absolute standard for human conduct.\textsuperscript{49} This, however, leads to difficulties of judgement when the interests of two sympathetic characters conflict. Since he feels that the world should be ordered for the satisfaction of human needs, Hardy sympathizes intensely with individual aspiration; and is therefore torn between sympathy and judgement when a character's desires cause him to act indifferently toward the feelings of others. This problem occurs in acute form in \textit{The Return of the Native}. Moreover, through the novels one can trace a pattern (albeit irregular) of increasing identification with the rebelling and aspiring characters. In the pastoral novels, \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} and \textit{The Woodlanders}, the moral emphasis is placed upon restraint and self-denial for the sake of others; but by the time he reaches \textit{Tess} and \textit{Jude}, Hardy acquiesces in the protagonists' drive for fulfilment and laments not so much their failure to adapt to reality, as reality's failure to supply their desires. \textit{The Return of the Native} is, as we shall see, in rather painful tension between these two patterns of judgement.

IV.

Before turning to examine Hardy's specific patterns of judgement in individual novels, mention must be made of one further factor in Hardy's aesthetic, and one which has a marked effect upon the consistency of the

\textsuperscript{49} The close connection between this moral imperative and Hardy's preternatural awareness of suffering is apparent in one of his slightly more hopeful notes: "Altruism, or the golden Rule, or whatever "Love your Neighbour as Yourself" may be called, will ultimately be brought about I think by the pain we see in others reacting on ourselves, as if we and they were a part of one body. Mankind, in fact, may be and possibly will be viewed as members of one corporeal frame" (\textit{Early Life}, p.294).
view of life he presents. Along with the serious, considered view of the human predicament, there exists in Hardy's art the impulse of the popular story-teller. He felt that one of the tasks of the novelist was simply to keep his readers entertained, and that this called for unusual situations and striking events.

The real, if unavowed, purpose of fiction is to give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience, mental or corporeal.

This is done all the more perfectly in proportion as the reader is illuded to believe the personages true and real like himself.

Solely to this end a work of fiction should be a precise transcript of ordinary life: but,

The uncommon would be absent and the interest lost. Hence,

The writer's problem is, how to strike the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality.

In working out this problem, human nature must never be made abnormal, which is introducing incredibility. The uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters; and the writer's art lies in shaping that uncommonness while disguising its unlikelihood, if it be unlikely. 50

A later notebook entry pursues the same idea:

A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman.

The whole secret of fiction and the drama - in the constructional part - lies in the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal. The writer who knows exactly how exceptional, and how non-exceptional, his events should be made, possesses the key to the art. 51

The uncommon and exceptional plays a large part in Hardy's art, and appears in several guises. It is seen in the folk lore of the Wessex peasants, with their tales of supernatural happenings and their superstitious customs;

50 Ibid., pp.193-4.
51 Later Years, pp.15-16.
there is the gothic element involving odd, grotesque appearances and strange actions; there is the use of coincidence and exceptional concatenations of events; and not least, it appears in the intensified and heightened emotions of the characters and in the melodramatic plots.

All these features are at times significant elements in Hardy's 'idiosyncratic mode of regard.' They each constitute part of the heightened realism with which Hardy sought to embody his vision of the human predicament; and they may also be included simply for their entertainment value. For instance, folkways may be used to heighten the sense of inevitable doom awaiting a character (as with Susan Nunsuch's burning of the effigy of Eustacia), or they may be used merely for the sake of local colour or comic relief (as with the superstitious fears of Christian Cantle). Similarly, the grotesque elements of a scene may be brought out to intensify our tragic expectations (Tess' confession scene), or merely to give vividness to the action (the nocturnal gambling scene on Egdon heath). Coincidence can impress upon us the irony of life, and the extent to which it is beyond human control, or it may enable the author to further his plot without having to create convincing motivating factors. The problem, then, is to decide when these features reflect Hardy's serious, considered view

52 See Hardy's intriguing defense of the Gothic element in "Barbara of the House of Grebe": 'But supposing "Barbara of the House of Grebe" to be indeed a grisly narrative. A good horror has its place in art. Shall we, for instance, condemn "Alonzo the Brave"? For my part I would not give up a single worm of his skull' (Letter to the Pall Mall Gazette, 10 July 1891, p.2. Quoted in Michael Millgate, Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist [London, 1971], p.289). The combination of (seeming) ingenuousness and flippancy makes this passage peculiarly difficult to place. But the ambivalence of tone is, at least in part, a reflection of the ambivalence of Hardy's response to the Gothic.

53 It must be noted, too, that at times Hardy's delight in the bizarre and macabre gets the better of his sympathy for suffering. We find, for example, the extraordinary aesthetic detachment with which he views a public hanging:
of life (his attempt 'to show more clearly the features that matter'),
and when they are used merely for interest's sake (to make the story
'exceptional enough to justify its telling'). Since the impulses of the
seer and the popular entertainer tend in similar directions, it is often
exceedingly difficult to distinguish what is intrinsic and what is ex-
trinsic to Hardy's vision.

But when all is said and done, when all approaches have been essayed,
and when all the novel's elements have been scrutinised, the despairing
critic finds that the most memorable and distinctive quality of Hardy's
vision has eluded the critical net. It is through a number of striking-
ly visualized scenes that Hardy's world lives in the mind. Ultimately
such scenes cannot be explained by reference to the author's control of
literary technique, but only by a visual imagination of extraordinary
power.\footnote{Note the great difficulty critics have always had in attempting to
reconcile Hardy's power with his often awkward, lumbering style. J.I.M.
Stewart, for example, sees Hardy's visual power as largely 'unaccountable,'
as his effect is often 'superior to the language in which it is conveyed'
(Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography [London, 1971], pp. 82, 84).}

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'I went there really for a jaunt. The hanging itself did not move me at all.
But I sat on after the others went away, not thinking, but looking at the
figure (it was a woman) turning slowly round on the rope. And then it be-
gan to rain, and then I saw - they had put a cloth over the face - how, as
the cloth got wet, her features came through it. That was extraordinary.
A boy had climbed up into a tree nearby, and when she dropped he came down
in a faint like an apple dropping from the tree. It was curious the two
dropping together' (Recorded by Elliot Felkin, "Days with Thomas Hardy:
From a 1918-1919 Diary," Encounter, XVIII [April 1962], 29). Felkin added
that Hardy 'tells these things with a sort of gaiety and a sort of
gaillardise.'
experience of a world that has been intensely felt and vividly seen -

seen, perhaps, as are the rustics around the Egdon bonfire:

The nimble flames towered, nodded, and swooped through the surrounding air, the blots of shade and flakes of light upon the countenances of the group changed shape and position endlessly. All was unstable; quivering as leaves, evanescent as lightning. Shadowy eye-sockets, deep as those of a death's head, suddenly turned into pits of lustre: a lantern-jaw was cavernous, then it was shining; wrinkles were emphasized to ravine, or obliterated entirely by a changed ray. Nostrils were dark wells; sinews in old necks were gilt mouldings; things with no particular polish on them were glazed; bright objects, such as the tip of a furze-hook one of the men carried, were as glass; eyeballs glowed like little lanterns. Those whom Nature had depicted as merely quaint became grotesque, the grotesque became preternatural; for all was in extremity. (24)

If Hardy's conception of human possibilities is bleak and drab, the world he creates never is.
3. THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Like its heroine, The Return of the Native is an instance of over-reaching ambition. The boldness of the book's conception, the loftiness of the author's aspiration, are apparent from the very first chapter with its daringly inflated rhetoric on Egdon Heath, Hardy's most famous Wessex setting. Hardy, the frustrated poet, may at times have disparaged prose fiction as an inferior literary form, but the structure, imagery, and tone of this novel indicate no lowly aim. Its author was clearly intent upon challenging comparison with the work of Shakespeare and the tragedians of ancient Greece. Hardy's ambition does not stop there. Besides attempting to endow the novel with the dignity of classical tragedy, he was seeking, as he had not done before, to dramatize the post-Darwinian consciousness of 'modern' man no longer at the centre of an ordered universe. Hence the marked 'darkening' of vision, as well as heightening of style, which most readers have felt in moving to The Return of the Native from Hardy's earlier fiction.

For many readers and critics alike Hardy's heightened style and buried archetypes have successfully evoked the grandeur of classical tragedy. The author of the closest textual study of the novel to date, John Paterson, claims that the book's action 'is placed in a medium of analogy, a frame of reference, that creates the illusion of antique nobility and grandeur. It puts on, in the incorporation of classical allusions and in the establishment of a Promethean frame of reference,
the imposing air of classical tragedy."¹ Such a view stems from a quite uncritical response to the way in which the classical references actually function in the novel. Unfortunately, in a more critical view, the book's lofty rhetoric seems quite overblown. The Return of the Native misses the level of high tragedy, firstly, because Hardy fails to give his protagonists heroic stature. The exotic imagery and allusions surrounding Clym, Eustacia, and the heath are simply not supported by the action and dialogue. There emerges a disconcerting disparity between what is claimed for the characters and what they dramatically substantiate.

But there is an even more fundamental reason why The Return of the Native cannot be ranged alongside the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare. Classical tragedy demands not only characters of heroic stature, but also characters who have some control over their fate, and who, while essentially noble, are yet responsible for (and thus partially deserving of) their destruction. Hardy, as we shall see, creates no such world. His characters are continually subject to the cosmic irony of fate, and are visited by a doom which, he seeks to convince us, is not of their making and is cruelly short of their deserts. In other words, the novel's pattern of judgement calls for a pathetic not a tragic response.

¹ The Making of The Return of the Native (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), pp. 167-8. In fairness to Paterson it should be noted that he has since modified his view of the novel somewhat. See his Introduction to the Standard Edition of the novel (New York, 1966), pp. ix-xxviii.
Even as a work of pathos, *The Return of the Native* is less than a complete success because Hardy cannot wholly convince either himself or the reader that his protagonists are devoid of responsibility for their downfall. Particularly in his attitude towards his heroine, Eustacia Vye, Hardy is at times seriously ambivalent and at others uncritically indulgent. His indulgence and identification with Eustacia are, of course, closely bound up with (and almost indistinguishable from) the aforementioned problem of rhetorical over-inflation. In seeking to substantiate this argument, I wish first to examine in general terms, through setting and plot, the fictional world Hardy creates, and then to turn more specifically to his judgement of that masterpiece of sensuality, Eustacia Vye.

II

Hardy's vision of the terms of human existence is given concrete embodiment in the novel's setting. Egdon Heath becomes a concentrated image of the 'arena of life' (215) as it appears to scientific, modern man. The heath does not symbolize nature so much as the general conditions which nature has produced. It has a symbolic directness almost akin to allegory. In its 'sombreness' it reflects the realities of life more accurately than fairer scenes: 'Fair prospects wed happily with fair times; but alas, if times be not fair!' (12). To Clym Yeobright, the heath crushingly reveals man's place in the evolutionary scheme of things: 'its oppressive horizontality ... gave him
a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun' (215). The initial description of Egdon evokes a dimension of time and an indifferent process which reduce the individual to inconsequence. Later in the novel, this is made explicit in Clym's experience. After learning of Eustacia's part in his mother's death, he returns home in white-hot fury, but his passion is dissipated by the natural setting:

Instead of there being before him the pale face of Eustacia, and a masculine shape unknown, there was only the imperturbable countenance of the heath, which, having defy'd the cataclysmal onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man. (329)

Above all, the heath is 'untameable, Ishmaelitish,' (14) quite resistant to attempted cultivation or the forces of civilization. So life, in Hardy's estimate, is finally intractable to man's efforts to mould it after his desires, to make it subservient to his will. The heath, then, is as much the embodiment of a state of mind, a mental outlook, as an objective landscape. And it is the reflection of an outlook which concentrates on the dark and disastrous in man's experience. In this view, the heath becomes an archetype: 'it was found to be the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster, and are never thought of after the dream till revived by scenes like this' (13; my italics).

While revealing the conditions of life which has to endure, the heath also discloses the effect of those conditions - since it is as much subject as man to natural processes. In its 'chastened sublimity'
it is, says Hardy, 'a place perfectly accordant with man's nature -
neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning,
nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring ...' (13). In Hardy's
world man achieves dignity (even sublimity) by stoic endurance, but
he is never master of his destiny; his desires, his aspirations and
intentions are all too often 'slighted' by an unsympathetic universe.
So it is that in modern times the 'old-fashioned revelling in the gen-
eral situation grows less and less possible as we uncover the defects
of natural laws, and see the quandary that man is in by their opera-
tion' (174).

Within this physical and intellectual setting, Hardy sought to
create a tragedy centred on the marriage of Clym and Eustacia. He
was obviously aiming for a mode of high tragedy comparable to that
of Greek and Elizabethan drama with a simplified, heightened fiction-
al world in which the unities were approximately observed, and the
characters, imbued with an elemental force of feeling, clash in
passionate conflicts that rend their lives while fate pursues its
course regardless of mortal pain. 2 In a note significantly dated

2 Late in life, Hardy singled out The Return of the Native as the only
prose work in which he had consciously attempted to preserve the unities;
the main action occupies precisely a year and a day, and Hardy prepared
a sketch-map for the first edition in order to demonstrate the novel's
unity of place (see Later Years, p. 235 and Early Life, p. 160). More-
over, in Hardy's original plan, the five books of the novel were intended
to correspond to the five acts of classical drama. It is significant
that before he began The Return of the Native, Hardy reports that he 'had
planned some tragic poems, being anxious to get back to verse if I could,'
but Leslie Stephen 'seemed disinclined, as editor, to take up the idea,'
so he turned once again to the novel form (with tragedy presumably still
April 1878 (that is, just after the writing of *The Return of the Native*), Hardy seems to conceive of tragedy as having its roots in human character and its shortcomings:

A Plot, or Tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by the said passions, prejudices, and ambitions. 3

This could serve as a not-inappropriate description of much classical and Elizabethan tragedy. That Hardy had, in fact, created a tragedy after the classical pattern few, if any, of his pre-war critics doubted. Carl J. Weber, for instance, concluded: "Hardy had made of the English novel, as no other English novelist has done, a completely satisfactory medium for high tragedy. That is one reason why he has been called "the Shakespeare of the English novel." And Weber twice proclaimed *The Return of the Native* to be 'Hardy's most nearly perfect work of art.' 4

Yet this concept of tragedy appears strangely out of place when we approach the actual novel. As has been suggested, this is not a tragedy in the classical mould in which free agents, through some defect of character, bring about their own destruction, but one in which the characters are always the victims of fate, and are therefore not held responsible for the catastrophe. It becomes, then, a work of pathos, not tragedy, in which the ill-made universe, not man, is to

3 *Early Life*, p. 157.
blame for human misery.\(^5\) In one of his very few articles on fiction, Hardy proclaimed that 'the crash of broken commandments is as necessary an accompaniment to the catastrophe of a tragedy as the noise of drum and cymbals to a triumphal march.'\(^6\) However, it soon becomes apparent that those broken in *The Return of the Native* are not commandments Hardy could respect, or, if they are, then the characters are to be seen as acting under irresistible pressures, and are not to be judged.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the character of Damon Wildeve. Though less one-sided than Alec d'Urberville, Wildeve is in some respects the villain of the piece. Yet, at his death, he too is seen as a victim deserving our compassion:

Less repose was visible in his face than in Eustacia's, but the same luminous youthfulness overspread it, and the least sympathetic observer would have felt at sight of him now that he was born for a higher destiny than this. The only sign upon him of his recent struggle for life was in his fingertips, which were worn and scarified in his dying endeavours to obtain a hold on the face of the weir-wall. (383)

The last sentence is remarkable in its precise, detached observation; yet, for all its detachment, the graphic detail heightens the pathos of Wildeve's desperate last struggle. Such evocative touches are

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6 "Candour in English Fiction," *Personal Writings*, p.129.
characteristic of Hardy's vision. His description of Angel Clare in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* might well be applied to Hardy himself:

'What arrested him now as of value in life was less its beauty than its pathos' (282).

Hardy's desire to create a work of pathos is apparent in almost all his major artistic choices as well as in the details of the novel. It is interesting to note how many happy events are omitted or seen through the eyes of someone for whom they bring no happiness. Clym and Eustacia's wedding is not presented dramatically but is imagined in detail by Mrs. Yeobright, so that the emphasis is not on their joy but her misery. Similarly, Wildeve and Thomasin's marriage is not seen from their point of view or that of the omniscient narrator, but is reported by Venn - again the character for whom the event holds most pain. The moments we see of Clym and Eustacia's courtship are always those in which their happiness is tinged with a sense of the transience of love or of the implacable opposition of Mrs. Yeobright. They are never seen in a state of unadulterated joy; not surprisingly they disappear from view for some time after the wedding, and the weeks of early conjugal bliss are summarized in one paragraph. At the novel's end, instead of concentrating on the comic celebrations following the marriage of Thomasin and Venn, Hardy focuses his attention on the outsiders, Clym and Charley. In the poignant picture of these two, united in grief, looking in from outside upon the celebrations at which they are quite forgotten, and whose spirit is totally at odds with their mood of sorrowful resignation, the novel exhibits
its characteristic tone. The book fittingly ends with this scene, a striking emblem of Hardy's vision of man, cut off from happiness, chastened by experience, and alone. The manipulation of all these incidents consists with Hardy's criticism of Meredith: 'He goes on all right and then just when he might put in a touch of pathos he doesn't do it. I wonder he didn't know better.' But it is only through a consideration of Hardy's rhetorical handling of plot that the consistency of the pathetic pattern emerges.

III

One of the most distinctive features of Hardy's 'idiosyncratic mode of regard' is the ironic perspective he casts on human aims and actions. His plots are loaded with ironic reversals of characters' expectations and intentions. The Return of the Native displays a remarkable number of such reversals even for a Hardy novel. The central irony of this sort is Eustacia's marrying Clym (at least partly) in order to escape the heath, and finding that marriage only binds her to it more firmly than ever. Similarly, Clym studies with especial intensity in an effort to secure a position outside Egdon as quickly as possible, but in so doing ruins his eyesight, forcing a much longer and (for Eustacia) more degrading stay on the heath than would have been necessary had he worked less conscientiously.

7 Elliott Felkin, p.28.
Such thwartings of human plans are a feature of Hardy's world and do not affect the major characters alone. The devoted Charley lights a bonfire at Guy Fawkes in the hope of giving Eustacia some pleasure and of arousing her from melancholy. In actual fact, the fire is seen by Wildeve as a signal from Eustacia; and, as a result, it leads directly to Eustacia's suicide—the very fate from which Charley had been trying to save her.

Mrs. Yeobright's scheme to use Venn's rival suit to pressure Wildeve into marrying Thomasin has, as the omniscient narrator points out, quite the opposite effect to that intended: 'By far the greatest effect of her simple strategy on that day was, as often happens, in a quarter quite outside her view when arranging it. In the first place, her visit sent Wildeve the same evening after dark to Eustacia's house at Mistover' (108; my italics). The narrator's comment is important here in emphasizing that such dissociations of intent and effect are characteristic of the human lot. Uncharacteristically, however, in this instance a double irony is involved, and Mrs. Yeobright gains her end unconsciously by indirect means. Not only does her stratagem send Wildeve to Eustacia, but it also ensures the breaking off of their liaison because Eustacia is immediately disenchanted with Wildeve when it appears he is no longer the object of Thomasin's desire. The irony in this second reversal is especially piquant since Thomasin is, of course, still deeply in love with Wildeve, and he himself is the deluded agent of his undoing with Eustacia.

The irony of fate is most bitterly apparent in the machinations of
Diggory Venn, the colourful reddlemen. Particularly crucial is his interference in the transfer of the guineas. In his effort to protect Thomasin's interests from her not-too-scrupulous husband, Venn mistakenly gives her the money designed for Clym as well as her own, and so precipitates the disastrous quarrel between Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright. The same devotion to Thomasin's cause later leads Venn to use intimidation in an attempt to force Wildeve to cease his surreptitious night visits to Alderworth. His action only causes Wildeve to go in the day-time, instead, resulting in the coincidence of visits which leads to Mrs. Yeobright's death and the destruction of Clym and Eustacia's marriage. It might also be noted that it was Venn who persuaded Mrs. Yeobright to visit Clym when she did in an endeavour to bring about a reconciliation of mother and son. In each case Venn's acts are inspired by a worthy motive, yet have disastrous consequences.

All these ironic reversals serve to emphasize the inability of human beings to control the workings of fate; they demonstrate the inevitable ineffectiveness of human efforts to improve the conditions of life. As in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it almost seems that there exists an 'ingenious machinery contrived by the Gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum." Also apparent is the completely gratuitous nature of much human suffering. The most obvious manifestation of this is, of course, the disastrous results of Venn's well-intentioned acts; but Venn himself suffers in the same way. As a result of Mrs. Yeobright's stratagem, he is led to believe

8 Ch.xliv, p.319 (Macmillan Papermac edition).
by Wildeve that he is now regarded as a likely suitor for Thomasin. Consequently, he goes to propose again with much higher expectations than at first and is cruelly undeceived. 9 But Mrs.Yeobright is not judged for causing pain by her innocent deceit, since the result of her action was not to be foreseen. Instead, such happenings emphasize (to quote Benjamin Sankey) 'the disproportion between the actual moral significance of an action and its consequences' in Hardy's world. As Sankey also notes, perhaps the most important difference between Hardy's attitude towards human suffering and that of earlier British novelists (particularly George Eliot) is that Hardy does not see suffering principally as a consequence of moral evil. 10

Philip Larkin is wrong, it seems to me, in asserting that pain in Hardy's novels is 'the continual imaginative celebration' of 'the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development.' 11 He is right to suggest that Hardy associated 'sensitivity to suffering' with 'superior spiritual

9 There is here a marked inconsistency in Hardy's plotting. On page 156 Wildeve is said to have told Eustacia at their last meeting that Venn was his rival for Thomasin's hand. But this previous meeting is reported in full and no mention is made of the identity of his rival (108-11). In fact, Wildeve himself is ignorant of his rival's identity since Mrs. Yeobright had refused to disclose it (106). The error is compounded when Wildeve later informs Venn he is the favoured suitor: "Mrs. Yeobright says you are to marry her" (162). Mrs.Yeobright had said no such thing. Having complimented myself on the discovery of this discrepancy, I subsequently found it to have been long since noted by Otis B. Wheeler, "Four Versions of The Return of the Native," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XIV (June 1959), 41-2.

10 Benjamin Sankey, The Major Novels of Thomas Hardy (Denver, 1965), pp. 41, 43.

11 "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic," The Critical Quarterly, VIII (Summer 1966), 178.
character,\textsuperscript{12} but that is quite a different matter from seeing suffering itself as good. Hardy's negative attitude towards suffering tends to restrict the potential heroism of his characters. Figures like Tess and Michael Henchard become more moving and, in a sense, more impressive in their endurance of pain; but it does not elevate and enlighten them, or increase their intrinsic worth. George Eliot, on the other hand, does take a positive view of suffering - which no doubt partly explains why she adopts a more critical attitude towards her characters than Hardy.

The ironic plot pattern also reveals the limitations of individual insight into the complex factors governing human life and relationships. Mrs. Yeobright is ignorant of the subtle, volatile nature of Wildeve's emotions and of the precarious balance in his relations with Thomasin and Eustacia. Eustacia, when she marries Clym, is not fully aware of the depth and strength of his resolve to eschew the fashionable world and pursue a humble, altruistic vocation. But generally Hardy lays the stress not on the characters' short-sightedness as the cause of their disappointments, but on the imperfection of a world where earnestly-followed plans fail to yield the intended result. As the experience of Venn, in particular, demonstrates, the nobility of a person's motives, the worthiness of his aims, is of absolutely no consequence in determining the end result of his actions in an amoral

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 178. Cf. Later Years, p.225: 'Sensitiveness was one of Hardy's chief characteristics, and without it his poems would never have been written, nor, indeed, the greatest of his novels. He used to say that it was not so much the force of the blow that counted; as the nature of the material that received the blow.'
universe. In a world of such gross defect Hardy's sympathies are all with his long-suffering, thwarted characters.

Like George Eliot, Hardy attempted to make his plots a direct reflection of the nature of the world as he saw it. But unlike George Eliot, Hardy was unable to forge all (or almost all - there are occasional recourses to the fortuitous in George Eliot's novels) his action in a causally-linked chain of events. The large quota of chance in his novels has always been a major difficulty for Hardy readers and a challenge to his critics. Despite all the critical intelligence that has been brought to bear upon the problem, it still seems that Hardy employed a greater degree of chance than is compatible with the claims of verisimilitude. Chance in his novels is sometimes seen as indicative of how little control man has over his fate, as symbolic of the 'actual absurdity in things,' or of 'Nature's indifference.' Hardy's art, as we have seen, does tend toward symbolism; but such statements do not really remove the difficulty. Since chance is used as part of a naturalistic plot sequence, it becomes an indication of how the world moves, not just of how it appears. The whole of Hardy's plots are meant to make concrete the indifference of the natural order, the intractability of the course of things to man's control, and the consequent absurdity of life to thinking men.

13 Guerard, p.85.

14 H.C. Webster, On a Darkling Plain, p.95. Hardy used chance, too, to stress 'the harrowing contingencies of human experience, the unexpectedness of things' (Tess, p.197).
The difficulty is not simply that chance is over-used and improbability produced (why is chance always mis-chance?). At the same time Hardy avows a deterministic philosophy: his view is 'that neither Chance nor Purpose governs the universe, but Necessity.' Yet he is unable to account for everything deterministically; in his novels natural law goes only so far in explaining events, and beyond this is the large area of the unknown where chance alone rules. As we have seen, Hardy is concerned to evoke a sense of mystery, of that which lies beyond empirical investigation; but, in seeking this effect, he sacrificed another. With his inability to explain why, to give his plots a consistent degree of causality, Hardy destroys the air of inevitability he sought to achieve.

But while his plots fail to embody consistently the principle of necessity, they do, contrary to his intention, often make the world appear purposive. In The Return of the Native all events tend towards a foreseen conclusion in a relentless, undeviating progression. There is no turning aside of fate in its march toward catastrophe; there are no more than the most fleeting episodes of gratuitous happiness in the general pattern of increasing woe; all usually takes place for the worst, and the moments of happiness only make the characters more

15 *Later Years*, p. 128.

16 That Hardy was seeking to stress the inevitable working out of tragedy is apparent in the synopses or arguments heading each book in the serial version. These synopses give a misleading impression of wholly explicable causality, and treat the characters almost as elements in a chemical formula. Selections from the synopses, abandoned in volume publication, appear in Joseph Warren Beach, *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* (Chicago, 1922), pp. 94-5.
vulnerable. The natural world may be merely indifferent to man (as Hardy's descriptions and natural imagery suggest), but it appears that the general course of things is governed by a malevolent purpose. Thus Hardy falsifies his own conception of the universe in order to bring about a tragic conclusion to his plot. 17

A view of the world as purposeless and a seemingly inevitable pathetic tragedy are incompatible unless plot operates on an observable principle of causality. As Irving Howe remarks, to establish an aura of logical inevitability was very difficult for a writer whose idea of fatality was itself pretty much of an improvisation. The aura of the inevitable was possible to classical tragedy, in which the gods were clearly apprehended and their desires, if not always their motives, were beyond question. It is also possible ... to modern fiction, in which the psychology of the characters controls the action. But it is virtually impossible for a novelist using the Victorian plot or something like it. Because Hardy remained enough of a Christian to believe that purpose courses through the universe but not enough of a Christian to believe that purpose is benevolent or the attribute of a particular Being, he had to make his plots convey the oppressiveness of fatality without positing an agency determining the course of fate. Why he should have boxed himself into this position is intellectually understandable but very hard to justify aesthetically. The result was that he often seems to be coercing his plots, jostling them away from their own inner logic. And sometimes, in his passion to bend plot to purpose, he seems to be plotting against his own characters. 18

17 Just occasionally in the novels there appear hints that, despite all his assertions to the contrary, Hardy himself was not quite convinced of the universe's neutrality. There is, for instance, this sinister suggestion in A Pair of Blue Eyes: 'Strange conjunctions of phenomena, particularly those of a trivial everyday kind, are so frequent in an ordinary life that we grow used to their unaccountableness, and forget the question whether the very long odds against such juxtaposition is not almost a disproof of it being a matter of chance at all' (Ch. viii). There is a similar suggestion in Desperate Remedies where Cytherea feels that coincidences betoken some 'invisible means at work' (Ch. ix).

18 Thomas Hardy, pp. 90-1.
Because he is unable to present everything in The Return of the Native in terms of necessity, Hardy, having begun with the intention of presenting an inevitable tragedy in a purposeless world, ends by making the world seem purposive and the tragedy (in this particular form) evitable. It is hard to deny the conclusion that coincidence and chance in Hardy often serve 'not so much to interpret the unrelenting trend of his action, but to further it.'

Nevertheless, Hardy's reliance upon coincidence to bring about a tragic conclusion must not be put down simply to ineptitude in plot construction. He was attempting to overcome a thorny rhetorical problem. Despite what Howe says about the Victorian plot, the action in The Return of the Native is largely controlled by the psychology of the characters, but Hardy could not allow this to be the decisive factor without making the characters responsible for their fates, and hence losing the strong pathos that he wished to create. Consequently, coincidence is used to free the characters of responsibility, and place the blame, instead, upon the ill-made universe, or some nebulous concept of fate. His apparent plotting against his own characters is often a ploy to protect them from criticism, and to maintain a strongly sympathetic response in the reader; that is, his plotting against his characters is, in reality, plotting for them.

Toward this end, Hardy introduces coincidences at a number of key points in the plot and makes them absolutely crucial to the catastrophe.

The destruction of Clym and Eustacia's marriage, and the death of Mrs. Yeobright, both depend upon the fierce quarrel that takes place between mother and daughter-in-law over the guineas. Truly, as Eustacia later remarks, "more bitterness is sown in five minutes than can be got rid of in a whole life" (281). Since Hardy wants to preserve our sympathy for both characters he engineers circumstances so that the quarrel is made more the product of mischance than of mutual antagonism. The quarrel is occasioned by Venn's mistaken handing of the money meant for Clym to Thomasin. The significance of the mistake is emphasized by the narrator's explicit comment: 'it was an error which afterwards helped to cause more misfortune than treble the loss in money value could have done' (243).

Charles Walcutt claims that in making this judgement Hardy is falsifying the facts:

If Hardy had not interpreted this action with the discourse on ill-chance ... the reader might well believe that the quarrel he has witnessed was provoked by Mrs. Yeobright's ungovernable temper and animus. With such a woman, no accident is required. She makes the trouble, prevents the "accident" from being explained away, is determined to quarrel with all of her young kinsfolk, and does.

In this interview, a boiling masterpiece of charges and countercharges, the two women pour out their accumulated grievances. In view of their explosive hostility, it is hard to imagine their maintaining a friendly conversation under any auspices. The guineas are the flimsiest pretext for Mrs. Yeobright to search out Eustacia and blame her for everything. Without that pretext, she would plainly have soon found another.

While not without truth, this view ignores the efforts Hardy makes to convince us that the mischance is decisive. It is made clear that Mrs. Yeobright is well-disposed towards Eustacia as she plans her visit, and that Christian Cantle's confession drastically alters her attitude. Christian tells her that Wildeve "said you ought to have gied Mr. Clym's share to Eustacia, and that's perhaps what he'll do himself" (247). After hearing this, Mrs. Yeobright hastened off to Eustacia, moved by a much less promising emotion towards her daughter-in-law than she had felt half an hour earlier, when planning her journey. At that time it was to inquire in a friendly spirit if there had been any accidental loss; now it was to ask plainly if Wildeve had privately given her money which had been intended as a sacred gift to Clym (248).

The essential significance of the mistake is further emphasized by Clym's comment: "I would rather have lost them [the guineas] twice over than have had this happen" (254). Obviously Hardy wants us to take the same view of the quarrel as does Eustacia, who sees it as "the fault of the circumstances" (253).

Not only is the accident made to seem the cause of the quarrel, but the details are so arranged as to provide the most exonerative circumstances possible. The result is a severe straining of credibility. In the gambling scene Venn has to be close enough to follow the fluctuations of fortune between Wildeve and Christian (and he is able to hear Wildeve's stories so well that he can ironically repeat them to him in the second dice game), yet must not overhear Christian's confession, after losing, that half the guineas belong to Clym, or he would not have made the mistake of giving them all to Thomasin. If Christian had lingered momentarily after his loss and seen Venn win...
all the money back, he would not have made such a misleading report to Mrs. Yeobright. His misleading report is, of course, essential to give her some justification for her immensely tactless approach to Eustacia.

An examination of Hardy's revisions to the gambling scene clearly reveals him to be working to make the quarrel more dependent on mischance and less on Mrs. Yeobright's animus— even though this entailed making the gambling scene itself less credible. In the serial version Christian never mentions that half the guineas are Clym's, so that the inconsistency of Venn's hearing part but not all of the gambler's conversation is avoided. Venn gives the guineas to Thomasin, and then assures Christian, and through him Mrs. Yeobright, that they have been delivered into the right hands. Hence, when she meets Eustacia by the pool, Mrs. Yeobright simply enquires whether the newly-weds have received her gift, not (with its deeply insulting implication) whether Eustacia has received money from Wildeve. The rift between the two women in this version turns on Mrs. Yeobright's antipathy toward Eustacia and her opposition to the marriage. Hardy then revised the whole episode so that, as it now stands, Mrs. Yeobright can quite innocently ask a question that fully justifies Eustacia's flaring up and so precipitates a bitter quarrel. 21

21 See Wheeler, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XIV (June 1959), 29, 30-1, 34, for an outline of the successive revisions to the scene. Wheeler fails to take cognizance of Hardy's rhetorical purpose in the changes, and, oddly enough, sees the plot as thereby 'tightened.' Far from being tightened, the plot is in fact made more rickety. The new form of the quarrel does not make Eustacia's failure to open the door to Mrs. Yeobright more 'inevitable' in giving her firmer grounds for hostility;
When all this is said, it still remains true that a violent rift between Mrs. Yeobright and Eustacia was inevitable without the intervention of chance, given each's volatile nature and latent hostility to the other. What Hardy has done is to short-circuit the course of necessity rooted in the psychology of his characters in order to forestall our adverse judgement of them. One critic has asserted that:

Hardy's major novels rarely or perhaps never actually turn on their improbabilities. They develop through basic and abiding factors of character and environment; and it is usually clear that if the incident Hardy describes had not occurred, some other detail could soon enough have brought about the same ultimate result. There is no real feeling that had Angel Clare received Tess's letter and read it, he would have torn it up and cheerfully married her; no real possibility that Clym and Eustacia would have lived happily ever after, had his mother's knocking at the door only wakened him as he slept.²²

This is true so far as it goes: the ends arrived at would have been essentially the same if Hardy had not used improbable means. But the fact is that, in the form Hardy gave them, his plots do turn on their improbabilities. What Holloway ignores is that, although the chance events do not alter the outcome of the action, they vitally affect the reader's judgement of the action.

Viewing The Return of the Native as a tragedy in the classical sense ('to which pity and terror rather than blind indignation against instead, it increases the stress on the decisiveness of coincidence - because Eustacia knows that Mrs. Yeobright suspects her of past relations with Wildeve she is more acutely aware of the awkwardness of the synchronous visits. Moreover, Eustacia is saved from blame by the fact that finally she does open the door (p. 291), though it is then too late.

fatal coincidence are the proper aesthetic reactions'), Walcutt argues that the 'self-destructive impulses' of the characters 'account for the tragedy far more significantly than coincidence can.' In support of this view, he attempts to show that there is a deep vein of self-destructiveness running right through the Yeobright family, but particularly apparent in Clym: 'Reading stubbornly on until he has ruined his vision is the act of a man who is subconsciously bent on self-destruction.'

Again, Hardy's plot rhetoric has been overlooked. It is made clear that Clym reads with such diligence in order to complete his studies and be free to move from Egdon to an outside teaching position as soon as possible. In this he is not motivated so much by personal ambition as by a desire to oblige Eustacia, who finds life on the heath oppressive. Here too, the accident with the guineas is decisive. In her unhappiness following the quarrel provoked by accident, Eustacia begs Clym to leave Egdon for Paris. This only gives a new urgency to his work:

All the effect that her remark had upon him was a resolve to chain himself more closely than ever to his books, so as to be the sooner enabled to appeal to substantial results from another course in arguing against her whim.(253)

The news of how much his mother also has been upset by the disagreement gives him even greater impetus:

Amid these jarring events Yeobright felt one thing to be indispensable - that he should speedily make some show of progress in his scholastic plans. With this view he read far into the small hours during many nights.(254)

24 Ibid., p. 168.
His consequent illness comes as suddenly and unexpectedly as a thief in the night. There is no question of his reading 'stubbornly on' ignoring obvious danger signals: 'One morning, after a severer strain than usual, he awoke with a strange sensation in his eyes ...' (254). Obviously, untoward circumstances, not a perverse, self-destructive streak in his character, are to be blamed.

Perhaps the most notorious coincidence in all of Hardy, and one upon which the whole catastrophe hangs, is that which results in the unopened door when Mrs. Yeobright visits Clym and Eustacia. This, obviously enough, enables catastrophe to be reached without any character being really responsible. An extremely unlikely double coincidence is used to excuse Eustacia's failure to admit her mother-in-law. Not only has Wildeve's visit coincided with Mrs. Yeobright's to make a meeting acutely embarrassing for Eustacia, but moreover she hears Clym murmur '"Mother"' in his sleep and thinks he has awakened and let her in.

The failure to admit Mrs. Yeobright and her consequent death are the factors which wreck Clym and Eustacia's marriage. However, if it was not for a further coincidence the knowledge of her unfortunate visit would have died with her, and the marriage been preserved (at least for a while longer). That Clym should learn of his mother's journey, and hence turn on Eustacia with fierce accusation, depends entirely upon the circumstances of Johnny Nunsuch being at hand to observe Mrs. Yeobright and to hear her last bitter words. Oddly enough, Hardy seems more intent on emphasizing than obscuring the
improbability of events. That anyone should have been present in the great emptiness of the heath to witness Mrs. Yeobright's visit is unlikely, but Hardy make it plain that Johnny Nunsuch's presence was exceptional: to his mother the boy confesses, "I didn't like to tell 'ee I had been so far. I was picking black-hearts, and went further than I meant" (327). Even granted the boy's presence, his knowledge might well have been kept from Clym but for the coincidence that has him blurt out his news to his mother in Clym's hearing. Without this mischance, Clym would have had no cause to blame either himself or Eustacia for his mother's death.

The plot in Book IV, then, is built upon a concatenation of impossibilities, and credibility is strained to the limit. Why does Hardy make catastrophe so tenuous? The answer appears to be his desire to wring as much pathos as possible from the character's situation. With such a degree of ill-fortune, with the characters so much the pawns of circumstance, a strongly sympathetic response is assured. It is not surprising that to many readers Hardy's world seems more truly hostile than indifferent to man. The characters have some justification for believing themselves victims of "the cruel satires that Fate loves to indulge in" (213). Here, even more than in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, the pattern of events suggests a sardonic 'President of the Immortals' making sport with human lives.

But while the causes of Mrs. Yeobright's death are unhappily engineered, the actual circumstances are much more successfully portrayed. Having been denied entry to her son's home, she begins her return
journey broken in spirit. Her increasing prostration in the intense heat and her even greater mental anguish at the thought that she has been deliberately rejected, are powerfully conveyed. Great pathos, devoid of sentimentality, is evoked by seeing her plight through the uncomprehending eyes of little Johnny Nunsuch:

'Your face is white and wet, and your head is hanging-down-like.'

'Ah, I am exhausted from inside.'

'Why do you, every time you take a step, go like this?' The child in speaking gave to his motion the jerk and limp of an invalid.

'Because I have a burden which is more than I can bear.'

The little boy remained silently pondering, and they tottered on side by side until more than a quarter of an hour had elapsed, when Mrs. Yeobright, whose weakness plainly increased, said to him, 'I must sit down here to rest.'

When she had seated herself he looked long in her face and said, 'How funny you draw your breath - like a lamb when you drive him till he's done for. Do you always draw your breath like that?'

'Not always.' Her voice was now so low as to be scarcely above a whisper. (293)

The pitifulness of her condition is augmented by her loneliness after the small boy deserts her, by the indifference of the natural world to this spectacle of human suffering, and by her desire for release - powerfully conveyed in the image of the soaring heron:

He had come dripping wet from some pool in the valleys, and as he flew the edges and lining of his wings, his thighs, and his breast were so caught by the bright sunbeams that he appeared as if formed of burnished silver. Up in the zenith where he was seemed a free and happy place, away from all contact with the earthly ball to which she was pinioned; and she wished that she could arise uncrushed from its surface and fly as he flew then. (295-6)

Of course, none of these elements would have the impact they do were we not aware that Mrs. Yeobright's death is imminent. It is the undeserved, coincidental nature of her death which sets the seal on the
pathos. Since Mrs. Yeobright's pride, quick temper, and irrational jealousy of Eustacia have played so large a part in the plot, such a pathetic death was necessary to restore the reader's alienated sympathies. Hardy repeats the device with the deaths of Wildeve and Eustacia.²⁵

In solving one rhetorical problem, the accidental death of Mrs. Yeobright raised another. While it ensured a sympathetic judgement of Mrs. Yeobright, it was also likely to cause readers to censure Clym for not having effected a reconciliation with his mother. Hardy undercuts such a reaction by showing how anxious Clym is to heal the breach with his mother, and by having him actually on his way to visit her when he finds her dying. Once more coincidence plays an important part in the pattern of judgement. Clym and his mother are both responsible for the division between them, and a failure to make any attempt at rapprochement would place either in the wrong. Hence both mother and son are seen to decide to make the first advance on the very same evening, so that neither is particularly to blame for the failure to heal the breach. Both overcome old grievances, swallow hurt pride, and make their approach on the same day, only to be thwarted by untoward circumstances.

Clym and Eustacia's marriage having been shattered by Mrs. Yeobright's death, there remains but one requirement to ensure the 'tragic'

²⁵ Cf. the reaction of the Egdonites to their deaths: 'upon the whole, neither the man nor the woman lost dignity by sudden death. Misfortune had struck them gracefully, cutting off their erratic histories with a catastrophic dash, instead of, as with many, attenuating each life to an uninteresting meagreness, through long years of wrinkles, neglect, and decay' (385).
ending, namely, that Eustacia re-establish relations with Wildeve. Naturally, for her to do so of her own free will would be to invite blame. Hardy shows his characteristic resourcefulness yet again: Charley, thinking to please Eustacia and unaware of its significance, lights a Guy Fawkes bonfire which Wildeve construes as a signal from his old lover. Regardless of (if not quite contrary to) her will, Eustacia is once more implicated with Wildeve.

But before the tragedy can be played out, Clym, as in his relationship with his mother, must be cleared of the charge that he made no attempt at reconciliation. The device of the delayed letter is therefore employed to exonerate Clym, and at the same time preserve the tragic ending. As with Clym and Mrs. Yeobright's failure to meet until it is too late, Hardy lays great stress on the irony of fate; he comes as close as he can to thwarting misfortune without actually doing so. The letter is written in plenty of time to reach Eustacia, yet Clym delays sending it for a day for no apparent reason. That word from Clym any time the next day would have stopped Eustacia from accepting Wildeve's offer is made plain:

Having resolved on flight Eustacia at times seemed anxious that something should happen to thwart her own intention. The only event that could really change her position was the appearance of Clym. The glory which had encircled him as her lover departed now; yet some good simple quality of his would occasionally return to her memory and stir a momentary throb of hope that he would again present himself before her. (355)

Despite Clym's delay the letter is still sent in time to reach Eustacia, only to be further delayed by Fairway's forgetfulness. Even with the second delay, the letter reaches Mistover before Eustacia's departure.
Obviously, there was no need to bring the letter so close; the very fact of his having written it was enough to exonerate Clym, and he might have delayed sending it another day or Fairway's lapse of memory might have lasted a little longer. But Hardy is not done yet; he must press the irony even further. Once delivered, the letter might have remained on the mantelpiece fruitlessly awaiting Eustacia in the morning. Instead, Captain Vye must sense the letter's urgency and take it at once to Eustacia's room. Furthermore, Eustacia is awake and could have received it, and all might have been well - might have been, that is, if the author had not been Thomas Hardy. Although Eustacia is awake and fully dressed, the light is out, and Captain Vye, believing she is asleep, does not disturb her (he might have knocked instead of peering through the key-hole!); and so she goes to her midnight rendezvous with Wildeve - and with Death - unaware of Clym's overture.

Hardy's intent was obviously to heighten the poignance of his story: that the characters were so very close to reconciliation and happiness makes their fate even more pathetic. But the nearness of the mischance, the extreme stress on the irony of fate, is more than the plot can bear. Furthermore, such extremity distorts the view of life implicit in setting. Fate is made to seem a malignant Being consciously devising cruel jests at man's expense. This would amount to a caricature of Hardy's vision did we not feel that the capriciousness belongs as much to the author as to fate.26

26 Cf. Lord David Cecil: 'The characters seem puppets all right; but puppets not in the hands of Fate but of the author' (Hardy the Novelist [London, 1943], p. 129).
It is no doubt true, as Sankey asserts, that 'Hardy's arbitrariness in plotting is in part a consequence of the demands made by the serial form.'

It is of the very nature of serial that it should crave a narrative replete with exciting action and surprising turns of events rather than one which quietly follows the logic of character to its appointed end. That Hardy was at times intent upon meeting the popular demands of the serial form is all too apparent from a disquieting letter to Leslie Stephen concerning *Far from the Madding Crowd*:

The truth is that I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial.

A similarly cavalier attitude to plot construction is revealed in a comment on another book that suffered from the exigencies of serial publication: 'The Mayor of Casterbridge begins today in the *Graphic* newspaper and *Harper's* Weekly. - I fear it will not be so good as I meant, but after all, it is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter.'

Clearly *The Return of the Native* did not escape the baleful effects of serialization from which other novels suffered. The most notorious instance is the ending of the novel - which occasioned this extraordinary authorial footnote:

28 *Early Life*, p. 131.
29 *Early Life*, p. 231 (note 2 January 1886).
The writer may state here that the original conception of the story did not design a marriage between Thomasin and Venn. He 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. (402)

This 'half-hearted concession of tepid happiness' (with its incongruous social comedy of Clym mistakenly thinking Thomasin to be in love with him) destroys the novel's unity of tone and upsets 'the proper artistic balance of the completed work.' It is true, as several critics of the novel have pointed out, that Shakespearian tragedy often ends in quietitude and anti-climax which readjusts, if not wholly reconciles, us to normality after the demise of tempestuous and heroic figures; and also that the marriage of Thomasin and Venn is not inconsistent with the character of either. But Edgar speaking for the lesser mortals who remain at the end of King Lear or Fortinbras' eulogy on Hamlet serve to round off the tragedy, ease us back to unheroic reality, help us to get what has gone before in perspective; they do not usurp our interest for themselves, do not demand that the reader, exhausted by the emotional climax, drag his reluctant attention through a further Act in pursuance of an insipid, drawn-out aftermath. What is really in question is not the psycho-

30 Beach, The Technique of Thomas Hardy, p. 7.

31 See, for example, Paterson, Introduction to the Standard edition (p. xxvi), who regards the sixth book as a virtue not a flaw, because it serves the function of the Shakespearian anti-climax and passes an ironic comment on and reconciles us to the splendid but wasteful deaths of Wildeve and Eustacia.
logical consistency but the proportion and balance of the novel's ending. Here we have Hardy's own word for it that the pressures of serialization had a detrimental effect upon his 'original conception.' Although we do not have such unequivocal authority for this judgement, it would seem likely that the same pressures were partially to blame for the book's over-generous quota of coincidences.

Quite apart from the demands of the serial form, Hardy's personal love of unusual and dramatic action must account for a measure of chance in his plots. As was mentioned earlier, he regarded the novelist as a teller of tales, an 'Ancient Mariner,' who must introduce the 'uncommon' in order to hold and entertain his audience. As Sankey says, 'Hardy's desire to keep the pattern of events interesting, and to provide the substance of good scenes, leads him to multiply causes - to exercise his invention rather than simply work out the logic of an initial situation.'

Yet, having made these concessions, it seems to me clear that the primary motive for the excessive use of coincidence in The Return of the Native is rhetorical: that is, Hardy's need to exculpate his characters while preserving a 'tragic' ending to his story. Since all the major characters are to be vindicated, the catastrophe must appear to be not due to human agency at all, but solely the work of fateful chance. Herein lies the crucial difference between the plots of The Return of the Native and Tess of the d'Urbervilles.

Since the success of Tess, unlike that of The Return, depends upon our sympathetic response to one character alone, Hardy can allow other characters to incur blame as agents of the catastrophe, and thus give his plot a real aura of logical inevitability. Hardy may want us to sympathize with Clare, but the book does not suffer a vital loss when he fails in this; Tess is strong enough to carry the whole. Thus the cause of the catastrophe (the break-up of their marriage) can be found in Clare's character without recourse to the improbable mischances that are necessary in The Return to bring about the destruction of the marriage without responsibility for its break-up resting on either Clym or Eustacia. The greater success of Tess is in no small part due to the fact that, even where coincidences appear, the plot does not really depend upon them as it does in The Return. Take, for example, the device of the stray letter which is used in both novels. The letter which Clym sends to Eustacia, and which only just fails through accidental delay to reach her in time, is, as we have seen, crucial to the plot; Hardy emphasizes that its timely receipt would have deflected Eustacia from her fateful flight. The failure of Tess's letter to reach Angel, on the other hand, though it involves just as much mischance, is not decisive in the catastrophe. Here Holloway is right: the end result almost certainly would have been the same without the improbability; there is no reason to believe that Angel would have reacted to Tess's confession before the wedding any differently than he does after it.33

33 When Angel returns to Wellbridge after the separation, he begins to doubt for the first time, the wisdom and justice of his action, and in 'the incoherent multitude of his emotions he knelt down at the bedside
The problem with building a plot on coincidence in *The Return of the Native* is not simply that it strains credibility and distorts Hardy's vision of life; it also leaves a number of important conflicts unresolved. As Walcutt points out, though 'the coincidences are introduced and stressed to make the tragedy seem less due to human frailty,' the trouble is that 'the flaws in the universe do not remove the flaws in the characters.' \(^3\)\(^4\) The coincidences gloss over the animosity between Mrs. Yeobright and Eustacia and the essential incompatibility of Eustacia and Clym, but they do not remove these human barriers to happiness. Thus, while sympathizing with Clym and Eustacia for the way fate destroys their marriage, we can neither avoid judging them for such an ill-advised union nor help seeing that it is doomed regardless of the play of outside circumstances.

IV

This tension between sympathy and judgement runs awkwardly throughout the book, and is particularly disconcerting in the case of Eustacia. To the reader familiar with Hardy, it is obvious that Eustacia goes against a great deal of the previously presented Hardyan values. His only major novel before *The Return of the Native* is wet-eyed. "O Tess! If you had only told me sooner, I would have forgiven you!" he mourned' (223). But this cry can hardly be given much weight because Clare knows that Tess tried to confess sooner, and admits as much on the wedding night: "'Why didn't you tell me before? Ah, yes, you would have told me, in a way - but I hindered you, I remember!'" (191)\(^3\)\(^4\)

Far from the Madding Crowd (published four years earlier), and Eustacia quite contradicts the values there embodied in the character of Gabriel Oak, who serves as both hero and ethical norm in the novel. She is vain and selfishly intent upon the realization of her own desires even at the expense of others; her existence is dominated by feeling, and she makes no attempt to control passion by reason or self-discipline;\(^\text{35}\) she is the discontented, rootless alien, out of sympathy with her natural and social environment. Many of the qualities that in the preceding novel gave man dignity and worth are totally rejected by Eustacia.\(^\text{36}\) It is no wonder that Hardy is at times on the defensive in his presentation of her - 'she was not altogether unlovable' (79), he comments at one point.

Yet, despite all this, Eustacia is very clearly the central figure and romantic heroine of the novel. True, Hardy wrote to Arthur Hopkins, the novel's serial illustrator, 'The order of importance of the characters is as follows - 1 Clym Yeobright, 2 Eustacia, 3 Thomasin and the reddleman, 4 Wildeve, 5 Mrs Yeobright....'\(^\text{37}\) This ranking,

\(^\text{35}\) Cf. Hardy's unequivocal judgement of Bathsheba: 'Her culpability lay in her making no attempt to control feeling by subtle and careful inquiry into consequences. She could show others the steep and thorny way, but "reck'd not her own rede"' (Ch. xxix). This judgement reads more like George Eliot than the later Hardy.

\(^\text{36}\) This is not to suggest that The Return of the Native represents a sudden volte face in Hardyan values. From the beginning, as witness the early poem "Heiress and Architect" (1867), there is sympathy in Hardy for those who vainly strive for happiness against an unsympathetic natural order. Amongst Hardy's best novels, however, The Return shows the emphasis shifting from the need for resignation and self-control to romantic sympathy for the aspirants.

however, is strangely at odds with the response of most readers, not only in the secondary ranking of Eustacia (Clym just is not sufficiently 'there' to form an adequate centre of interest), but also in the surprisingly low rating given Mrs. Yeobright. Since the three-cornered struggle of mother, son, and daughter-in-law is at the heart of the novel's design, it seems that Mrs. Yeobright is clearly the third most important character. As for Eustacia, most readers would agree with George Wing's judgement: the novel's 'mainspring, its imaginative centrality, its energy, lie in the grand, tormented Eustacia.'

Nevertheless, it would seem that Hardy's conception of his heroine was not fixed from the beginning. After a detailed study of the revisions made both before and after publication, John Paterson has argued that in the original conception of the novel Eustacia was 'not the romantic protagonist but the wicked and even disreputable antagonist. In her initial appearance, indeed, she was to have suggested a satanic creature supernatural in origin.' Then, apparently, Hardy 'discovered and indulged an unconscious and even reluctant sympathy with the demoniacal creature he had initially conceived,' and, early in its development, the novel was 'shaken to its foundations by a formal and substantive revolution, in the course of which its themes


39 The Making of The Return of the Native, p. 17.
and values were entirely reversed. Originally conceived as the "erring" heroine to Thomasin's "pure" heroine, and often suggesting the antagonist of the novel, Eustacia Vye emerged as the tragic protagonist.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, 'Hardy came to celebrate precisely what he had set out, here as elsewhere, to exorcize and anathematize.'\textsuperscript{41} Obviously such a fundamental reversal of Hardy's usual pattern of judgement was fraught with danger, and the presentation of Eustacia as romantic protagonist required all the rhetorical skills he could muster. Unhappily, either these were inadequate, or the task he set himself was beyond the resources of the nineteenth-century novel.

Aware, no doubt, of the magnitude of the task confronting him, Hardy provides Eustacia with a long and gradual rhetorical build-up. He approaches her circuitously from a great distance. She is first seen as a mysterious dark silhouette atop the barrow on the heath, then as the originator of a singular and unexplained bonfire which outlasts all its rivals. In each case the narrator temporarily limits his omniscience to the view-point of Venn and the Egdon rustics. These distant perspectives, together with the rustics' comments, surround Eustacia with a romantic aura of mystery and loneliness. We are made to feel that here is a person of unusual interest.

When Eustacia does appear on centre stage, she is still seen externally from a human viewpoint. The omniscient narrator limits his view to that of an imaginary human observer to maintain suspense and

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., pp. 29, 133.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 133.
build interest in his heroine. However, he is not content to be a mere recorder; he is quick to point out the significance of externals:

What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind which had led to her presence here. There was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound, the woman's brain had authorized what it could not regulate. One point was evident in this; that she had been existing in a suppressed state, and not one of languor, or stagnation. (62)

The naturalistic viewpoint provides only partial, fleeting glimpses of Eustacia's features, so that our curiosity is titillated. When described she is given a glamorous allure by comparison with the features of Sappho and Mrs. Siddons.

Then, in the "Queen of Night" chapter, comes Hardy's major set-piece description designed to establish Eustacia as a potentially tragic figure of heroic proportions. The basic claim of the chapter is asserted boldly at the opening: 'Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation!' (73). She is surrounded with imagery of darkness, pagan sensuality, and flaming passion to suggest an exotic creature of unusually intense feeling. Exotic and classical allusions come together in a particularly evocative passage:

Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights; her moods recalled lotus-eaters and the march in 'Athalie'; her motions, the ebb and flow of the sea; her voice, the viola. In a dim light, and with a slight rearrangement of her hair, her general figure might have stood for that of either of the higher female deities. The new moon behind her head, an old helmet upon it, a diadem of accidental dewdrops round her brow, would have been adjuncts sufficient to strike the note of Artemis, Athena, or Hera respectively, with as close an approximation to the antique as that which passes muster on many respected canvases. (75)

By such means, Hardy insists upon Eustacia's uniqueness, beauty, and
'Tartarean dignity.' The author's infatuation with the rare creature of his imagination often renders his point of view indistinguishable from hers:

She thought of it [the evanescence of love] with an ever-growing consciousness of cruelty, which tended to breed actions of reckless unconventionality, framed to snatch a year's, a week's, even an hour's passion from anywhere while it could be won. Through want of it she had sung without being merry, possessed without enjoying, outshone without triumphing. Her loneliness deepened her desire. On Egdon, coldest and meanest kisses were at famine prices; and where was a mouth matching hers to be found? (77)

Whose is the final question? Here apparently Hardy identifies with Eustacia's outlook. This tendency of the omniscient author to merge his view into that of his heroine is common throughout the novel.

In concentrated form this chapter shows all the rhetorical resources by which Hardy attempts to make Eustacia a grand tragic heroine. He employs heightened description, classical allusions, exotic images, direct assertion and sympathetic insight into her thoughts and feelings. But the Eustacia he shows us in action and dialogue does not measure up to the rhetorical figure. The 'Tartarean dignity' which Hardy continually emphasizes just is not apparent in action. This disparity is especially noticeable in the juxtaposition of the rhetorical build-up in Chapter vii with Eustacia's behaviour in Chapter vi.

In this first encounter with Wildeve, Eustacia fails to demonstrate those qualities Hardy claims for her. Her complete reliance on such a light-weight character as Wildeve for personal happiness ill-assorts with the goddess-like dignity and self-contained depth of character that Hardy asserts are hers. Her girlish impatience for his appearance and excitement when he comes, and her big-sisterly tyranny
over little Johnny Nunsuch hardly 'strike the note of Artemis, Athena, or Hera.' Hardy insists on the richness and fullness of her inner life: 'Like the summer condition of the place around her, she was an embodiment of the phrase "a populous solitude" - apparently so listless, void, and quiet, she was really busy and full' (77). Yet we are given no inside views of this fullness, and her dependence on Wildeve suggests a marked lack of inner resources: '"Must I go on weakly confessing to you things a woman ought to conceal; and own that no words can express how gloomy I have been because of that dreadful belief I held till two hours ago - that you had quite deserted me?"' (71) This lack of inner resources is apparent at other points in the book. When she hears of Clym's return she has been existing in a state of 'mental vacuity,' her 'colourless inner world' unable to enliven the 'blank afternoon' (116). Later we are told that 'to be left to pass the evening by herself was irksome to her at any time' (304).

The whole encounter with Wildeve is especially damaging to Eustacia's pride and dignity since he has till now deserted her in favour of Thomasin. Even though she can read into Wildeve's failure to go through with the marriage a prior devotion to herself, and regard his turning to Thomasin in the first place as an act of revenge (perhaps after a lovers' quarrel), not as a serious attachment, Eustacia's readiness to forgive him and make the first approach are surprising in a character of 'celestial imperiousness' (75).

In the second meeting with Wildeve (Ch. ix), Eustacia again shows
a strange lack of dignity in her helpless attachment to him while he
treats her with mocking coolness:

'I have my times and my seasons. One moment you are too tall,
another moment you are too do-nothing, another too melancholy,
another too dark, another I don't know what, except - that you
are not the whole world to me that you used to be, my dear.
But you are a pleasant lady to know, and nice to meet, and I
dare say as sweet as ever - almost.' (93)

Wildove is trifling with her, and Eustacia herself is at times little
more than a school-girl playing at adult love: '"I think I like you
to desert me a little once now and then. Love is the dissmallest
thing where the lover is quite honest"' (91).

The inability to resist a passion for an unworthy man is largely
what demeans Eustacia, just as its opposite ennobles Tess.42 Her
long and courageous struggle against the temptation Alec offers gives
Tess near-tragic stature, while Eustacia's need of Wildeve shows an
inner poverty. In this Eustacia resembles so many of Hardy's char-
acters, since they nearly all depend upon external circumstances for
their happiness and are helpless in the grasp of strong passions.
(Even Tess, for all her strength, finally succumbs to external press-
ures). At worst, they sometimes seem like hollow puppets dangled
upon the strings of desire and circumstances.43 Glym is an obvious

42 Eustacia herself sees this at times: 'At moments her pride rebelled
against her passion for him, and she even had longed to be free' (79).

43 Cf. A.P. Elliott: for Hardy, 'The source of happiness is not within
ourselves, but is dependent on external factors, on securing what we want
most in life. Virtue is not really its own reward in Hardy.... A devo-
tion to truth and goodness can ennoble human nature in struggle and dis-
appointment, but it does not constitute repayment. It may exalt human
life, but it does not make it bearable' (On.cit., p.35). In George Eli-
ott's world, in contrast, though circumstances do frustrate human hopes,
goodness can be its own reward and make life bearable - as, for instance,
in the peace Dorothea wins through to by conquering her jealousy and put-
ting others' interests before her own.
exception - as his fortitude in his blindness shows, he can honestly say 'my mind to me a kingdom is.'

Of course, to Eustacia, Wildeve is just a stop-gap to fill a need for want of a better man. It is this need, a romantic's sense of frustration by circumstances, a passionate desire for self-fulfilment, which is Eustacia's over-ruling feeling and her main claim to sympathy. It is perhaps the major failing in Hardy's presentation of his heroine that she is never seen to image self-fulfilment in any terms higher than that of a life of glamour and luxury in the Parisian beaux monde. However much we may be called to sympathize with her aspirations, their vulgarity and tawdriness make it well-nigh impossible to do so.

Imprisoned on the wild heath and cut off from society, Eustacia cannot express her romantic nature in action. It is for this reason that Hardy must successfully reveal her inner life if he is to convince us that she is a superior creature with an extraordinary capacity for feeling and power of imagination. This he fails to do. He merely asserts the richness of her inner life ('how extended was her scope both in feeling and in making others feel' [149]); it is not shown. For instance, Eustacia's imagination is fired by her encounter with the home-coming Clym, and she weaves around him a whole 'cycle of visions' (124). Then, that night, she dreams a dream:

and few human beings from Nebuchadnezzar to the Swaffham tinker, ever dreamt a more remarkable one. Such an elaborately developed, perplexing, exciting dream was certainly never dreamed by a girl in Eustacia's situation before. It had as many ramifications as the Cretan labyrinth, as many fluctuations as the Northern lights, as much colour as a parterre in June, and was as crowded with figures as a coronation. (125)
Except for one 'less extravagant episode' at the end of the dream, neither Eustacia's imaginings nor her dream are directly presented to us. Hardy makes explicit his evaluation of Eustacia: 'The fantastic nature of her passion, which lowered her as an intellect, raised her as a soul' (126). Yet he does not demonstrate her heightened imagination, the grandeur and intensity of her feeling, as he must to convince us of her elevation. This deficiency in presentation is felt through the whole book.

Throughout, the presentation of Eustacia is largely external; and the inside views we do get are usually summaries, not direct reports of her thoughts and feelings. The reliance on external portraiture, attempting to convey her personality through highly coloured descriptions and imagery, makes of Eustacia a somewhat stagy, stilted figure. Perhaps a technique as yet unknown to the novel, namely the stream-of-consciousness, was necessary to make Eustacia's essentially commonplace aspirations alive and sympathetic to the reader. When she regards Clym, returning from Paris as 'like a man coming from heaven' (116), Hardy seems to sympathize, and expect us to see the tawdriness of her dream of self-realization as more due to poverty of experience and education than of imagination. Even so, her longing for the fashionable pleasures of Paris, "that rookery of pomp and vanity" (112) in Captain Vye's phrase, places her (as some critics, both contemporary and modern, have felt) on a par with Emma Bovary.44

44 E.g. The Athenaeum (23 November 1878): 'it is clear that Eustacia Vye belongs essentially to the class of which Madame Bovary is the type' (Quoted in Thomas Hardy and His Readers, p.44); and Robert Evans: 'Selfish, immature, incurably romantic, she belongs to the lesser world of Emma Bovary, who would recognize her immediately and welcome her as a sister' ("The Other Eustacia," in Novel: A Forum on Fiction, I [Spring 1965], p. 257). Evans, however, seems to me wrong in suggesting that Hardy recognized the deficiencies of his heroine.
Hardy's endeavour in *The Return of the Native* is to persuade us that Eustacia has 'the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman' (73). If he had succeeded in making her a 'model goddess,' the fact that she was less than a 'model woman' would not have mattered; she would then have appeared beyond the reach of conventional moraljudgements. But since she fails to appear in external dignity or elevation of feeling anything of a goddess, her shortcomings as an ordinary mortal become painfully obvious. Having found her to exist not on the exalted plane of 'the Héloïses and the Cleopatras' (80), but on the less lofty level of Emma Bovary, we cannot but apply those moral standards which Hardy tried to render inapplicable.

The consequences of this realignment are far-reaching. Eustacia's high rebellion against life on the heath is now seen to be as much a failure on her part to come to terms with reality as a failure of life to satisfy her legitimate desires. That the rustics, and even characters like Venn and Thomasin, find the heath compatible is perhaps irrelevant; they do not share Eustacia's sensitivity. But when an equally intelligent and sensitive character, like Clym, is at home on the heath, Eustacia's rebelliousness is called in question. Clym's ability to find inner contentment in his furze-cutting, despite his blindness, contrasts sharply with Eustacia's misery at their social degradation. But here the pattern of judgement is not made clear; it is a moot point who is to be judged the more strongly, Clym for his blindness to Eustacia's needs, or Eustacia for her inability to achieve Clym's cheerful independence of external fortune. Here Hardy's
judgements are obscured by the near equal claims to sympathy of two characters; whereas in Tess the heroine's clear pre-eminence makes for a clear-cut pattern of judgement. However, this aside, it soon becomes apparent that no environment, not even the Parisian beau monde, would satisfy Eustacia for long.

In addition, Eustacia's disdain for others' feelings seems to indicate not a divine imperiousness, but a merely human selfishness. Her lack of consideration for Thomasin in her passion for Wildeve tells against her, though Hardy manipulates point of view to modify our response. Thomasin's suffering upon her return unwed from Anglebury is apparent, but it is seen only from without, so our involvement in her plight is limited. Then we see nothing at all of her till after Eustacia has given up Wildeve. By thus removing Thomasin entirely from view, Hardy tempers our judgement of Eustacia's selfishness. However, her egoism in love is clearly placed by Venn and her inability to comprehend his selfless devotion: 'The reddleman's disinterestedness was so well deserving of respect that it overshot respect by being barely comprehended; and she almost thought it absurd' (160).

Hardy's deep sympathy with human desires for happiness places him at times in an ambiguous position. Since he feels that all such desires should be permitted to find fulfilment, he does not judge them, except where they hurt other people - this is really Hardy's only general moral standard. As long as others are not affected, no human desires are condemned. Thus Hardy deeply sympathizes with Eustacia's unrelieved longing for a glamorous life, but judges her
when she is prepared to seek this at the expense of others. Here tension develops, for the more she suffers, the more Hardy sympathizes; but, as her longing becomes more intense, she becomes less heedful of others. For example, in the urgency of her desire to get to the Yeobright Christmas party in order to see Clym, she inflicts much gratuitous pain on Charley, taking advantage of his devotion to her, and then repaying him in the most perfunctory and unfeeling manner.

In the same way, Clym and Eustacia's marriage is placed, not because it cannot succeed (though this is apparent), but because each is so heedless of the other's needs and aims, and they project their own desires upon the loved one. Again ambiguity results from Hardy's intense sympathy for his characters. He feels that two such people should be able to find happiness in this life, and that if they feel they cannot achieve it outside of marriage to one another, then such a marriage should work. His tenderness toward them is powerfully conveyed in description:

Clym took the hand which was already bared for him - it was a favourite way with them to walk bare hand in bare hand - and led her through the ferns. They formed a very comely picture of love at full flush, as they walked along the valley that late afternoon, the sun sloping down on their right, and throwing their thin spectral shadows, tall as poplar trees, far out across the furze and fern. Eustacia went with her head thrown back fancifully, a certain glad and voluptuous air of triumph pervading her eyes at having won by her own unaided self a man who was her perfect complement in attainments, appearance, and age. (213-4)

To counter the impression of their essential incompatibility, Hardy attempts to show them to be in the grip of irresistible passion.

This is made convincing in Eustacia's case: we see how her expecta-
tions are aroused by the rustics' talk ("she and Clym Yeobright would make a very pretty pigeon-pair" [115]), and how she idealizes Clym as the solution to her situation. But Clym's passion is less credible. In Tess the mutual attraction of Tess and Angel is made to seem as inevitable as natural law by the vivid evocation of the natural world at Talbothays, by the all-pervading sensuousness of life there amid the resurgence of spring. In such an environment the characters are powerless to resist love. But the ascetic Clym is given no such reason for forsaking his better judgement. His relationship with Eustacia is paralleled by the seasons, but the natural environment is not given the irresistible force and immediacy it has in Tess.

There is a similar inadequacy in Hardy's rhetorical handling of Eustacia's suicide. Two main methods are employed to clear her of blame. Firstly, Hardy avoids presenting the actual event, and is sufficiently ambiguous about events leading up to it to create doubts over whether her death is suicide or mere accident. (The same tactics of omission and confusion are employed in Tess: when Tess succumbs to Alec we are left in considerable doubt as to whether rape or seduction is involved). Secondly, Hardy works to show the apparent hopelessness of Eustacia's situation, to show that hope of reconciliation with Clym has gone, and that Wildeve as the only means of escape is inadequate for her. The facts are there to support suicide in one as melancholy as Eustacia, yet we are not shown the pressure of these facts upon her. Again there is lack of direct, sustained inner views. Her desperation and her impetus toward suicide are not made very
convincing psychologically since we rely too much on Charley's view of her. Like Charley, we can only conjecture 'the inner details of her life' (338). As she comes to the point of decision the view is rigidly exterior: 'The idea seemed to gather force within her, and she remained in a fixed attitude nearly ten minutes, when a certain finality was expressed in her gaze, and no longer the blankness of indecision' (340). 'Seemed' is one of Hardy's most overworked words; he so often limits himself to an external view of character, and must rely on inferences, judging what appearances 'seem' to indicate. So, at the end, the weight of evidence for Eustacia's death-wish rests almost entirely on the image of her sinking down on Rainbarrow; by contrast with her first appearance there in solitary triumph, Hardy seeks to convey visually what has happened to her in the course of the plot. But the image is not sufficiently supported by the rest of the book.

Though Hardy for the most part uncritically identifies with his heroine, there is occasional ambivalence, even conflict, in his pattern of judgement. There is still discernible at times the pattern of Far from the Madding Crowd - where the characters are judged according to their relative success or failure in adapting to an indifferent universe, where Bathsheba must learn to temper her desires to the needs of the community - or the pattern of Hardy's initial conception as outlined by Paterson.

Despite his sympathy for Eustacia's restless aspiration, Hardy is able sometimes to stand back and see its danger in a more objective view:
To have lost the godlike conceit that we may do what we will, and not to have acquired a homely zest for doing what we can, shows a grandeur of temper which cannot be objected to in the abstract, for it denotes a mind that, though disappointed, forswears compromise. But, if congenial to philosophy, it is apt to be dangerous to the commonwealth. In a world where doing means marrying, and the commonwealth is one of hearts and hands, the same peril attends the condition. (79)

Despite his stress on the untowardness of circumstances, Hardy can write of Eustacia's position after the closed-door incident: 'instead of blaming herself for the issue she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot' (304). Apparently, Eustacia is to be seen as deluding herself in disclaiming responsibility - yet Hardy himself often does this on her behalf. During Clym's violent, self-accusing grief after his mother's death, Eustacia is said to be 'anxious to avoid the sight of her husband in such a state as this, which had become as dreadful to her as the trial scene was to Judas Iscariot' (315). A critical view of Eustacia seems implicit, too, in Thomasin's eminently rational response to the heath: 'To her there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground. Her fears of the place were rational, her dislikes of its worst moods reasonable' (369-70). Such passages as these conflict awkwardly with the uncritical sympathy which characterizes Hardy's usual response to his heroine. Although there is no question where the balance lies, Hardy has not yet become whole-heartedly romantic; he still feels the pressure of human
responsibility, and is divided in a way that he is not in Tess of the d'Urbervilles.\(^45\)

Hardy's uncertainty over how to judge Eustacia and his dominant tendency to identification are at times both nakedly apparent:

Eustacia's manner had become of late almost apathetic. There was a forlorn look about her beautiful eyes which, whether she deserved it or not, would have excited pity in the breast of anyone who had known her during the full flush of her love for Glym. (262; my italics)

And again:

To an onlooker her beauty would have made her feelings almost seem reasonable. The gloomy corner into which accident as much as indiscretion had brought this woman might have led even a moderate partisan to feel that she had cogent reasons for asking the Supreme Power by what right a being of such exquisite finish had been placed in circumstances calculated to make of her charms a curse rather than a blessing. (264)

Despite his misgivings, the tendency is plain; Hardy comes increasingly to see things from Eustacia's viewpoint, becomes rather more than a 'moderate partisan.' By the time of her final flight, Eustacia is clearly to be seen as a victim, as one to be pitied not judged: 'Anyone who had stood by now would have pitied her ....The wings of her soul were broken by the cruel obstructiveness of all about her' (360).

\(^{45}\) Cf. David Eggenschwiler, "Eustacia Vye, Queen of Night and Courtly Pretender," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XXV (March 1971), 444-54. Eggenschwiler sees much greater ambivalence in Hardy's attitude towards his heroine, but, oddly enough, does not regard this as destroying the novel's unity. Hardy establishes 'two opposing literary and cultural frames of reference by which to judge his character either as the heroine of romantic tragedy or the alazon of a comedy satirizing romanticism' (44.5). Eustacia is both 'a heroine and the parody of a heroine' (451-2), yet 'Hardy is not really confused in his conflicting representations of Eustacia' (454). How such a deeply divided novel can yet be unified quite escapes me. Moreover, Eggenschwiler, while justly noting the petty, self-indulgent elements in Eustacia's character, seriously over-estimates the novel's inherent division by seeing as consciously mock-heroic what Hardy intended to be genuinely heroic.
Her final soliloquy is offered without qualification or criticism:

'How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how
destiny has been against me: ... I do not deserve my lot! ...
O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world!
I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted
and crushed by things beyond my control!' (361)

Unfortunately, the reader is less inclined to take Eustacia on her
own evaluation.

Throughout the novel, then, there is a dislocation between what
Hardy claims for Eustacia and what she is dramatically shown to be;
and at times there is considerable ambivalence in Hardy's own atti-
tude towards his heroine. As F.B. Pinion says,

Hardy's portrait is overdone, a composite piece of work which
endows Eustacia, despite her Greek origins, with attributes
out of all proportion to the young woman of the novel. Had
these qualities been more related to her actions - and they
are often such that this seems impossible - or to Clym's im-
pression of her, she might have been more the goddess Hardy
imagined her.46

In failing to endow the central character with heroic stature, the
book falls short of the level of high tragedy which some critics have
claimed for it. (It should be noted that over-inflated claims and
ambiguity in authorial attitude are also apparent in the portrait
of Clym. Space, however, does not allow a similar consideration
of his case). Furthermore, as I have sought to show, the novel's
primary stress on the irony of events calls for a pathetic not a
tragic response. At times Hardy is wonderfully successful in evoking
that response - as in the scenes of Mrs. Yeobright's death; of Clym

and Eustacia's courtship on the heath, where their vulnerability to
time is poignantly apparent; above all in the severation of their
marriage with Clym steeling himself at the moment of parting to his
conscientiously misguided course:

At last all her things were on. Her little hands quivered
so violently as she held them to her chin to fasten her bonnet
that she could not tie the strings, and after a few moments she
relinquished the attempt. Seeing this he moved forward and
said, 'Let me tie them.'

She assented in silence, and lifted her chin. For once
at least in her life she was totally oblivious of the charm of
her attitude. But he was not, and he turned his eyes aside,
that he might not be tempted to softness. (336)

It is by such flashes, however fitful, that The Return of the Native
continues to illuminate whole stretches of human experience and to
justify close critical attention. But, viewed as a whole, the novel
is much less successful as a pathetic tragedy than Tess of the d'Ur-
berville, largely because Hardy is unable to reveal sufficient of
Eustacia's inner life to make us overlook her shortcomings, unable,
that is, to substantiate his heroine's dignity and worth with the
triumphant success he enjoyed thirteen years later.
More than any other Hardy novel (except possibly *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* exists for and because of one character. Here perhaps more than in any other Victorian novel our judgement and acceptance of the book as a whole depend upon our evaluation of the protagonist. In the writer's lifetime *Tess* was (and probably still is today) Hardy's most widely-read and hotly-debated work. The uncommonly strong feeling it aroused usually took the form of a deeply sympathetic or antagonistic response to the heroine. The way in which audience reaction polarized, and its intensely partisan nature are strikingly illustrated by an entry in Hardy's notebook:

The Duchess of Abercorn tells me that the novel has saved her all future trouble in the assortment of her friends. They have been almost fighting across her dinner-table over *Tess*'s character. What she now says to them is 'Do you support her or not?' If they say 'No indeed, She deserved hanging.' A little harlot!' she puts them in one group. If they say 'Poor wronged innocent!' and pity her, she puts them in the other group where she is herself. ¹

This extreme partisanship is demonstrated not only without the novel, but also within. Throughout her unequal struggle against the destructive forces in her life, the author broods compassionately and (source of the book's peculiar poignance) helplessly over his doomed heroine. Whenever she appears to transgress against conventional moral standards he pleads mightily (and often inconsistently) on her behalf, building up a great weight of extenuating circumstances or introducing a new standard of judgement with which to vindicate her actions. Her passionate advocate during her life, he is seen at her death as the one

¹ Later Years. p. 6.
faithful friend who has never forsaken her, and in whose affection alone she can find final refuge - '... Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed/Shall lodge thee.' The epigraph epitomizes the attitude to Tess embodied in the novel as a whole.

Such is the force of feeling Hardy brings to the book that more than thirty years after its publication it was said of him, 'He talked of Tess as if she was someone real whom he had known and liked tremendously.' It is in this force of feeling that both the strength and weaknesses of the novel lie. Translated into concrete and dramatic terms, Hardy's imaginative feeling makes Tess live in vividly visualized scenes, so that to the reader, too, she becomes as 'someone real'; but it also leads Hardy to identify so closely with his heroine that at times a balanced critical perspective is lost, and he becomes illogical and confused in her defence.

Just as the Duchess of Abercorn's guests divided over the character of Tess, so contemporary critics divided over Hardy's evaluation of her. The harshly critical nature of some reviews seems to have been at least partly responsible for Hardy's turning away from fiction to verse not long afterwards. After reading a 'smart and amusing' review in The Quarterly, Hardy bitterly concluded: '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 if many of the contemporary

2 Ibid., p. 244. Cf. Hardy's letter to T.K. Macquoid, 29 Oct. 1891, 'I am glad you like Tess - though I have not been able to put on paper all that she is, or was, to me.' Quoted in Millgate, pp. 266-7.

3 Later Years, p. 7.
reviews were bigoted and uncharitable to both author and subject, they did at least focus attention on what is still the major critical issue of the novel: namely, how viable is Hardy's value-judgement of Tess? This issue is so important because Hardy does not simply present a dramatic picture of his heroine in a highly-particularized fictional world, leaving the work of evaluation to the reader; instead, he makes clearly evident his own evaluation, and works hard to secure our concurrence. Just as Hardy's feeling for Tess is apparent in the epigraph, so his judgement of her is summarized by the sub-title, 'A Pure Woman.' In the words of an early reviewer, 'The book is an argument for Tess - an argument steeped in passion, an argument by one who knows that the coarse facts are against him...'

II

Before analyzing Hardy's passionate argument for Tess, before examining how he handles the particular 'coarse facts' that appear to be against him, I wish to consider in broader terms how Hardy controls our apprehension of his heroine. By the technique he uses, by the way he mediates Tess's story, Hardy makes of that story much more than just an argument for an individual character; it becomes a vehicle to convey his wider vision of human possibilities and the universal pathos of things. His lament for Tess is set in the context of a view that


embraces the suffering of all ages and the great ironic reversals and cyclic patterns of history itself. Of paramount importance in the novel is the uniquely-individualized portrait of Tess Durbeyfield; for, as Irving Howe remarks, Hardy here 'stakes everything on his sensuous apprehension of a young woman's life.... Nothing finally matters in the novel nearly so much as Tess herself: not the other characters, not the philosophic underlay, not the social setting.' Yet Tess is not seen simply as an unsophisticated country girl, but also as a typical figure, an archetype of womanly devotion and resilience, and a representative of all mankind struggling valiantly but vainly against the inexplicable, inexorable forces of an indifferent cosmos.

This larger perspective develops out of Hardy's idiosyncratic handling of point of view. The experience of Tess is enclosed by (and gains much of its affecting poignance from) that of the omniscient narrator. As in most of Hardy's novels, the narrator views events from a lofty vantage point, remote in space and time from that of the participants. This elevated, retrospective view distances and dwarfs the characters; they are seen as mere ciphers in the play of an impassive fate, as nonentities in the vast movement of historical forces. Yet, at the same time, being omniscient, the narrator can enter into the character's present situation, presenting events as they impinge upon the individual who has not the narrator's knowledge of the future. This dual perspective, the mingling of a character's time-bound, earth-bound awareness with the narrator's timeless, spatially-detached view, has long been seen as one of the most distinctive features of Hardy's 'idiosyncratic mode of regard':

6 Thomas Hardy, p. 110.
The insignificance of man, the briefness of his days, are always present in Hardy's mind; he never fails to see them from the point of view of the indifferent power, and the enormous past is always present with him as a moment of time. Man would not be worth writing about, were it not for one of Mr. Hardy's distinctive gifts as novelist and dramatist - what might be called his double vision. If he sees the littleness, he sees also the greatness. Watching from infinity, he shows human life as futile and trivial. Down in the stress and the turmoil, looking out from the very heart of some farmer or milkmaid, he shows human life heroically grand. There is no trace in his work of contempt for human will, endurance and passion. All may be futile; but all are engrossing to the interest, and all may compel admiration.

This paradoxical effect of distance and closeness, of sympathy and detachment, is strikingly apparent, first, in a characteristic Hardyan opening device - that of beginning his narrative with a scene of a lone pedestrian moving along a road through an otherwise deserted tract of countryside. So begin both *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The effect is particularly emphatic in *The Return of the Native*, where a whole chapter is devoted to the vast, swarthy, untameable tract of heathland before an old man appears on the road that 'bisected that vast dark surface like the parting-line on a head of black hair' (15). In *Tess* the huge dimensions of the setting are not directly presented, but are implicit in the statement that the lone pedestrian is moving from one village to another 'in the adjoining Vale' (5). The aerial god-like vantage point of the omniscient narrator allows him to take in the great sweep of the natural scene, and man is seen as but a tiny part of it; yet, for all his seeming insignificance, he becomes the centre of attention.

There is (as many critics have pointed out) a real likeness here to the film director's method: the scene is viewed from a great distance as in a 'long shot'; the 'camera eye' pans round the rolling countryside, then homes in on the minute figure in the centre of the panorama. Hence there is a paradoxical effect of both humbling and elevating man, the 'double vision' of both his insignificance and importance. Samuel Chew sees the technique as serving to draw the reader 'into the theatre of action.' But, though we are drawn down to the character's level and into his concerns, the sense of distance is still implicit within the point of view, and occasionally the narrator reverts openly to this god-like stance - as, for instance, when Tess, entering the Valley of the Great Dairies, is seen 'upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly'(89), or when Tess and Marian appear on the desolate drabness of the Flintcomb-Ash swede-field like flies 'crawling over the surface'(238).

In addition, these 'camera-eye' views of a character on the road make concrete Hardy's vision of the lonely dreariness of life, of the stoic struggle of man against his ineluctably earth-bound lot. The way stretching out before Captain Vye is (typically) a 'long, laborious road, dry, empty, and white'(15). And repeatedly in Tess we are given a picture of the heroine like that of her home-coming after her ill-fated sojourn at Trantridge:

The basket was heavy and the bundle was large, but she lugged them along like a person who did not find her especial burden in material things. Occasionally she stopped to rest in a mechanical way by some gate or post; and then, giving the baggage another hitch upon her full round arm, went steadily on again. (63)

After her desertion by Clare she becomes again 'a lonely woman with a basket and a bundle in her own porterage' (227), and her energy and spirit are consumed in weary trudging along dusty upland roads in continual search of employment and security.

In these repeated pictures of Tess travelling alone and desolate, the deep sympathy the reader feels is controlled and modulated by the aloof, impersonal viewpoint. Since Hardy feels so intensely for Tess, this detached viewpoint is essential to the maintenance of a balanced tone; without it he might easily become maudlin and wallow in self-indulgent emotionalism. There are occasional lapses, it is true, when Hardy makes too explicit an appeal to the reader's sympathy — as for instance, in the harvest scene at Marlott:

It was a thousand pities, indeed; it was impossible for even an enemy to feel otherwise on looking at Tess as she sat there, with her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor gray nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises — shade behind shade — tint beyond tint — around pupils that had no bottom... (76)

Or again, when the deserted Tess is shown pathetically rehearsing her husband's favourite songs in despairing hope of pleasing him should he return, Hardy overloads the scene with the comment, 'It would have melted the heart of a stone to hear her singing these ditties...!' (284)

Yet such passages aside — and they are few — one cannot but agree with Irving Howe that 'the controlling perception of Tess is restrained
and... "healthy". Furthermore, Hardy's very restraint helps to make *Tess* so moving an experience for the reader because we are neither embarrassed by a gratuitous display of feeling (as is sometimes the case with Thackeray and his Amelias), nor pressed too hard for an emotional response (as in some of Dickens' death-bed scenes). In *Tess*, Hardy exhibits his own mastery of those qualities which he so much admired in the works of Anatole France - 'the force of reserve, and the emphasis of understatement.' For the most part, Hardy's own feelings are not imposed upon the reader, but are implicit in the structure of the work and the judgements he makes of characters and events.

The detached, retrospective point of view not only enables Hardy to control his intense feeling for Tess, it also provides a means of coming to terms with all experience, a secure perspective from which to view life in general. In one of his notebook musings he writes,

> For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable.

So it is that in his artistic recreations of life 'passing away,' Hardy withdraws from the unbearable experience of the transient moment to a

10 *Later Years*, p. 159.
11 *Early Life*, p. 275.
vantage point outside time and disengaged from human passion. It is as if he had become a ghost no longer subject to the rending of human emotion, wandering in an ethereal realm free from the pressures of matter and time. To the omniscient narrator, the passing spectacle of human woes is bearable because it is in fact past-life; what are for the characters the hidden consequences, the uncertain prospects of the future, are for him certain, concluded issues.

The reader is placed in a mid-way position. Partaking partially of the narrator's privilege, we view with some irony the characters' unsuspecting approach to events which will decisively shape their futures. Yet we do not share the narrator's knowledge of the precise form of the future; we are merely given certain general expectations; we see a tragic outcome as likely but not sure. The reader, therefore, has fears and sees dangers that the characters are blind to, but still shares the characters' hopes and desires for the happy outcome (which the narrator knows is not to eventuate). Hence we are led through the spectacle of life passing away, entering into the characters' emotions and going through the anguish once felt by the narrator, till we too come, finally, to share the narrator's resigned and contemplative view which is 'at least tolerable.'

Most critics testify to the tremendous emotive power of Tess; it is one of the most deeply moving novels in the language. 'No novel by Hardy,' concludes Harold Child, 'perhaps no novel ever written, is so full of pity as this... and so hot an expression of personal feeling.'

Pathos is, of course, inherent in the narrative itself. Given such a heroine and such a fate we cannot but take pity; yet our response might be very superficial indeed were it not for Hardy's skilful handling of point of view.

The intensity of our feeling is the result of the degree to which we are made to enter into Tess's view of things and to imaginatively share her experience. Almost every character and event in the book are seen predominantly as they impinge upon Tess. By seeing into her consciousness we are given to understand and sympathize with her as no other character can. The importance of this inside view to a true estimate of Tess is often explicitly stated by Hardy:

Inside this exterior, over which the eye might have roved as over a thing scarcely percipient, almost inorganic, there was the record of a pulsing life which had learnt too well, for its years, of the dust and ashes of things, of the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love. (234)

We are given to see what makes Tess so distinctive and sympathetic a character and see too that other people are blind to the 'pulsing life' within.

Nevertheless, the inside views in *Tess* are not nearly as direct and as detailed as those of a modern novelist using the stream-of-consciousness technique, or even of George Eliot. The reader enters into the sense of Tess's experience primarily through the extraordinary immediacy of the scenes in which she appears; through the power and pathos of Hardy's external view we are made to empathize with his heroine. What we are given, then, is not the feel of her consciousness itself (as we would be by Joyce or Faulkner) so much as the feel
of events that are impinging upon her. Thus the reader, as it were, responds for Tess, imaginatively recreates what is supposedly going on (but not always directly seen) within her. In other words, what we enter into is the author's experience of his heroine as he follows through the course of her life. 13

It may be thought that the detached view of the narrator (embracing as it does all of time and space) calls in question the viewpoint of Tess which it envelops. Such seems to be the opinion of J. Hillis Miller, who discusses Hardy's technique in these terms:

To embrace any view of things with a wider, more inclusive view, or even one merely different, is to put both views in question.... There is a way of seeing which views both the activities of an enthill and the whole span of history as equally small and unimportant. Any number divided by infinity is zero, and Hardy's shifts of perspective are made on the basis of an infinite detachment which, in his arithmetic of vision, shows the widest and narrowest views as equally null. 14

But rather than showing both the limited view of the characters and the vast historical perspective of the narrator as equally null, it seems to me that Hardy in fact presents both as equally real and valid.

Hardy's sense of the importance of the individual comes out in

13 Cf. Oscar Cargill's definition of empathy in literature: 'it means sharing to the fullest extent possible the experience of the author in living with his creations' ("The Validity of Literature," College English, XXX [May 1969], 622). I shall have cause to refer to this article again later in seeking to distinguish the different responses to character elicited by Hardy and George Eliot.

his iteration of the subjectivity of experience. Tess's illegitimate child is

a waif to whom eternal Time had been a matter of days merely, who knew not that such things as years and centuries ever were; to whom the cottage interior was the universe, the week's weather climate, new-born babyhood human existence, and the instinct to seek human knowledge. (81)

The narrator sees things in terms of 'years and centuries'; he is aware of the dimensions embraced by 'eternal Time' and 'the universe.' In such a perspective human life appears of the merest transience and of the slightest significance. Yet the individual outlook is dwarfed, not invalidated by this enclosing perspective; we are made to see that for the individual his or her own view of reality is the only one possible. Angel Clare arrives at Hardy's view when he sees Tess as

a woman living her precious life - a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself. Upon her sensations the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow-creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born.

This consciousness upon which he had intruded was the single opportunity of existence ever vouchsafed to Tess by an unsympathetic First Cause - her all; her every and only chance. (130)

On occasion, Hardy makes an almost absolute endorsement of the subjective point of view:

At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were. (72)

It is here that the ethical core of the novel lies. Bernard J. Paris argues that 'the importance of the individual consciousness to
itself ' is merely a source of value in the novel, and that this does not provide a consistent moral norm. As Paris shows (and we shall see later), Hardy does use inconsistent standards of judgement in Tess, yet it seems to me that this principle is fundamental to Hardy's moral outlook, and does, in fact, dominate the ethical pattern of the book. These passages form the most explicit statement of this standard, but it is implicit throughout the novel in Hardy's use of point of view. As has been mentioned, all the characters are seen in relation to Tess and are judged by the way in which their actions impinge upon her; the subjectivity of Tess's experience, the importance of her life to herself, is constantly stressed. Since the reader is almost never permitted to consider other characters by themselves, but only as they affect Tess, he must unavoidably judge those who hurt her more harshly than is their due. By allowing Tess's viewpoint to dominate the book, Hardy evokes a much more limited response to Alec than he probably intended. But such was his dilemma: if he had


16 In a recent article, Robert E. Heilman makes a very persuasive case for seeing both Alec and Angel as much more complex and fully-rounded characters than most readers usually do. However, his argument fails to convince finally because he considers these two characters by themselves, and this the novel never allows us to do. For instance, Heilman argues that Alec has been too harshly judged, and his consideration and concern for Tess not fully recognized. But Alec's solicitude for Tess is seen from her point of view as constituting a threat - in fact, it is more dangerous to her than mere indifference. See "Gulliver and Hardy's Tess: Kouyhshims, Yahoos and Ambiguities," Southern Review, VI (April 1970), pp. 277-301.
entered as fully into Alec's and Angel's subjective worlds as he does into her's, he would not have achieved as strong a response to Tess as he needed.

The overwhelming sympathy we feel for Tess comes, then, of the fact that, though she 'was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself' (77) in her world, she is made, through Hardy's narrative skill, precisely that for us. But (strange as it may seem) the poignance of her experience is the greater because, in the objective historical perspective which the narrator commands, it is shown as ultimately insignificant. The individual's life becomes so much more pathetic by its very pointlessness. If the pain Tess endures had any meaning, if her suffering served any purpose, it might by at least tolerable - to us, if not to her. Instead, the whole pattern of the plot and the character of the narrator's point of view go to show the indifference of the world to man's plight and the utter irrationality of human suffering. The numerous coincidences underline how gratuitous and illogical is the occurrence of pain; Tess is so often the victim of mere chance.

The inconsonance of the natural order with man's feelings is one of the most characteristic elements of the narrator's vision. Tess's wedding-night confession has been called 'the most lacerating scene in all Hardy.' 17 The poignancy of the scene is very much sharpened by

17 H.C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy (Manchester, 1916; revised and enlarged 1921, 1937), p. 55.
the setting as seen through the narrator's eyes:

The fire in the grate looked impish - demoniacally funny, as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it too did not care. The light from the water-bottle was merely engaged in a chromatic problem. All material objects around announced their irresponsibility with terrible iteration. (190-1)

After the harrowing drama of Angel's reaction to Tess's story, the narrative returns to the detached note with which the chapter began.

Clare, prostrate with emotional shock, retires.

He reclined on his couch in the sitting-room, and extinguished the light. The night came in, and took up its place there, unconcerned and indifferent; the night which had already swallowed up his happiness, and was now digesting it listlessly; and was ready to swallow up the happiness of a thousand other people with as little disturbance or change of mien. (197)

For the most part this perspective evades the characters because they are so deeply embroiled in the present situation. Only occasionally can they distance themselves from their immediate emotions to attain something of the narrator's objectivity. It is significant that Tess achieves this detached view most clearly during her long period of confinement and withdrawal from life following the trauma of her experiences at Trantridge. She comes then to see, with the narrator, that

The past was past; whatever it had been it was no more at hand. Whatever its consequences, time would close over them; they would all in a few years be as if they had never been, and she herself grassed down and forgotten. Meanwhile the trees were just as green as before; the birds sang and the sun shone as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain. (77)

Brief mention has been made of the restrained, almost neutral tone which Hardy maintains by means of his detached vantage point, and which
particularly distinguishes his authorial voice from those of the more garrulous of other great eighteenth and nineteenth-century omniscient authors. A Fielding or a Thackeray has little compunction about obtruding his thoughts and feelings upon the fictional world, nor any unease in acknowledging his ability to manipulate the outcome of events. Hardy, on the other hand, attempts to decrease the sense of his presence as the controlling, all-knowing creator. A device which he frequently uses to remove himself from the scene is that of attributing to a 'hypothetical observer' observations which actually belong to the omniscient narrator. This ploy is, perhaps, more common in The Return of the Native, especially in episodes on the heath where a scene is often introduced with words like, 'Had a looker-on been posted in the immediate vicinity of the barrow, he would have learned ...' (21); and so a strong sense of the emptiness of the heath, of the absence of all actual observers, is maintained. In Tess, the device allows Hardy to convey his feeling by tactful indirection. The terrible poignance of Angel and Tess's return to Talbothay's, attempting to keep up the pretence of a newly-wed union which has actually been utterly shattered, is apparent only to the narrator; to all the other characters they are what they seem - a

18 For the term, and the insight, I am indebted to John Paterson: 'nothing is more characteristic of Hardy than the habit of transferring to a hypothetical observer or set of observers an otherwise authorial comment' (The Making of "The Return of the Native," p. 161).
blissful couple. Yet the irony is presented as it would appear to an imagined observer:

... as she and Clare stood side by side at leaving, as if united body and soul, there would have been something peculiarly sorry in their aspect to one who should have seen it truly; two limbs of one life, as they outwardly were, his arm touching hers, her skirts touching him, facing one way, as against all the dairy facing the other, speaking in their adieux as 'we,' and yet sundered like the poles. (211, my italics)

In instances such as this, the notion of a hypothetical observer is made explicit, but there are many occasions when such a notion is implicit. After describing the letter, purportedly from Mrs. d'Urberville inviting Tess to Trantridge, the narrator remarks, 'Mrs. d'Urberville's handwriting seemed rather masculine' (39). To whom, we immediately ask, did it 'seem' so? Obviously not to the narrator, who in his omniscience knows full well that the letter is from Alec; equally obviously not to Tess, who would not have accepted the invitation had she suspected Alec of such trickery. We are left then to infer another viewpoint, that of an impersonal, unseen but limited, human observer. Hardy often renounces the privileges of omniscience and binds himself to this limited external view in order to reduce the sense of his presence; hence the repeated use of 'seemed' in his descriptions. This device also helps make concrete Hardy's notion of man as utterly alone in the world without recourse to an omniscient judge or an absolute reference point. Yet, whether the hypothesis of an unseen human observer is made explicit or not, the tactic often seems artificial and unnecessarily coy.
There are times, however, when the narrator's temporary relinquishing of omniscience is justified by the special effect gained. When Tess leaves home to go to Trantridge her helplessness and aloneness in face of future danger are poignantly captured by tying the viewpoint to that of the family watching her departure. We see with rather than through the family (since they are incapable of so refined a view). Tying the view to a particular point in space makes concrete the distance between Tess alone on the hill-top and the family at its foot. The effect of the scene is remarkably like that in *The Return of the Native* where the reader (with Mrs. Yeobright) sees Thomasin, going alone to her marriage, as 'a pale-blue spot in a vast field of neutral brown, solitary and undefended except by the power of her own hope' (163). It is often in miniature scenes like these that Hardy's vision of man's place in the world (note that the field of brown is 'neutral' both visually and morally) is most effectively realized.

The impersonality that the narrator's voice gains by such means gives it something of the quality (as Donald Davidson notes) of the balladist or epic poet. But the book's affinities with the epic do not end there. By focusing attention so exclusively on the central character, and by the way in which her life is imaginatively recreated, the field of brown is 'neutral' both visually and morally) is most effectively realized.

19 'He wrote as a ballad-maker would write if a ballad-maker were to have to write novels; or as a bardic or epic poet would write if faced with the necessity of performing in the quasi-lyrical but nonsingable strains of the nineteenth century and later' ("The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's Fiction," in *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Albert J. Guerard [Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963], p. 12).
the novel gives her an epic grandeur, an almost legendary status; she becomes for the reader, as for Clare, 'no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman - a whole sex condensed into one typical form' (111).

The retrospective viewpoint is essential to this effect. Hardy repeatedly emphasizes the great gulf between the present of narration and the time at which the action took place. By making his distance in time so explicit, the narrator gives events an air of fatality - as shall be seen later. But, by the same token, he also magnifies the significance of Tess's story - to have survived so long it must have assumed something of the nature of a legend; and, by his retelling, the narrator preserves and safeguards the legend for all time.

Often the merest touches go to suggest the legendary character of the story. When Clare joins in the Harlott dance and chooses a girl other than Tess as his partner, the narrator comments that 'The name of the eclipsing girl, whatever it was, has not been handed down' (114). This is obviously an inconsistency in the omniscient narrator who just three pages earlier had been able to see into the private world of each of the girls in the dance; but the statement stresses the great distance in time of events, and implies their epic quality - knowledge of them is 'handed down.' The notion of the narrative as orally transmitted recurs in the picture of Angel and Tess's lonely walk after her confession. The episode is reported by an unnamed observer who, at first, 'did not bear in mind the curious incident, which, however, he recalled a long while after' (195), and it
is passed on by word of mouth: 'It was said afterwards that a
cottager of Wellbridge, who went out late that night for a doctor,
met two lovers in the pastures, walking very slowly, without
converse, one behind the other, as in a funeral procession ...(195)\textsuperscript{20}

Yet, for the narrator, the story of Tess does not simply lie
far distant (though recoverable) in the past. By his extraordinary
ability to revivify the past, the narrator makes of Tess a living
legend, eternally present in his intense apprehension of her
existence: 'Thus Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the
landscape; a fieldwoman pure and simple, in winter guise ... '(233-4).

By the use of the present tense in such passages, the figure of Tess
looms out of the past to inhabit the timeless present of the narrator.
This effect is most powerfully achieved in the harvest scene:

This morning the eye returns involuntarily to the girl
in the pink cotton jacket, she being the most flexuous and
finely-drawn figure of them all. But her bonnet is pulled
so far over her brow that none of her face is disclosed
while she binds, though her complexion may be guessed from
a stray twine or two of dark brown hair which extends below
the curtain of her bonnet. Perhaps one reason why she
seduces casual attention is that she never courts it, though
the other women often gaze around them.

Her binding proceeds with clock-like monotony. From
the sheaf last finished she draws a handful of ears, patting
their tips with her left palm to bring them even. Then
stooping low she moves forward, gathering the corn with both
hands against her knees, and pushing her left gloved hand
under the bundle to meet the right on the other side, holding

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. "Beyond the Last Lamp," (Collected Poems, p. 296), which
recounts an almost identical incident, and thus suggests that this
episode may derive from Hardy's actual experience.
the corn in an embrace like that of a lover. She brings the ends of the bond together, and kneels on the sheaf while she ties it, beating back her skirts now and then when lifted by the breeze. A bit of her naked arm is visible between the buff leather of the gauntlet and the sleeve of her gown; and as the day wears on its feminine smoothness becomes scarified by the stubble and bleeds.

At intervals she stands up to rest, and to retie her disarranged apron, or to pull her bonnet straight. Then one can see the oval face of a handsome young woman with deep dark eyes and long heavy clinging tresses, which seem to clasp in a beseeching way anything they fall against. The cheeks are paler, the teeth more regular, the red lips thinner than is usual in a country-bred girl.

It is Tess Durbeyfield, otherwise d'Urberville, somewhat changed - the same, but not the same; at the present stage of her existence living as a stranger and an alien here ... (74-5)

This scene has a strangely paradoxical quality, a combination of objectivity and subjectivity, a closeness yet distance in time. The objectivity is there in the detached viewpoint, the impersonality of 'the eye.' Yet the scene is not simply the product of a neutral camera-eye passively recording each action; there is a definite sense of a distinctive mind re-acting to and shaping passing events, a consciousness that reveals itself in every simile used ('holding the corn in an embrace like that of a lover') and in each supposition made ('Perhaps one reason why ... '). The present tense, of course, makes for visual immediacy; it creates an impression of the action taking place before our eyes 'This morning,' on the very morning of occurrence. Yet we soon realize that this is only an illusion; we cannot really return to the characters' time scheme; we can immerse ourselves in their present only temporarily. We are soon reminded that the narrator has broken into Tess's time span from a position far outside it and to which he eventually will return ('It is Tess
Durbeyfield ... at the present stage of her existence ...'). Furthermore, although the present tense gives immediacy, the actions described are not fully particularized, are not made unique in space and time. The tense used is the habitual present, not the actual present. Hence the actions themselves are seen as representative, regularly-repeated motions ('Her binding proceeds with clock-like monotony'). There is no sense of a fixed moment in time, rather the whole day and the whole scene are held suspended in time ('... as the day wears on its feminine smoothness becomes scarified and bleeds'). The scene exists, then, not in the historical present, but in an eternal present of the narrator's consciousness. Time (the domain of the fleeting moment, the never-to-be-repeated opportunity) is one of the elements most destructive of Tess's happiness; but in Hardy's imaginative recreation of her experience, she is finally liberated from its tyranny into a timeless realm where she ever lives for the appreciative reader.

If the narrative perspective expands Tess's story to near-legendary dimensions, it does so very much at the expense of the other characters. As Irving Howe remarks,

21 In the serial version, the notorious 'President of the Immortals' sentence read, "Justice" was done, and Time, the Archesatirist, had had his joke out with Tess.'
Only one "character" is almost as important as Tess and that is Hardy himself. Through his musing voice, he makes his presence steadily felt. He hovers and watches over Tess, like a stricken father. He is as tender to Tess as Tess is to the world. Tender; and helpless.\footnote{22 Op. cit., p. 131.}

Hardy's omniscience in the fictional world makes his helplessness in face of his heroine's fate all the more poignant. Writing of the role of the implied author in Fielding's novels, Wayne C. Booth suggests that 'our growing intimacy with Fielding's dramatic version of himself produces a kind of comic analogue of the true believer's reliance on a benign providence in real life.'\footnote{23 The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 217.} It is, of course, impossible for Hardy to create such an analogue if he wishes his work to express his considered view of life, a view which sees no evidence of 'a benign providence in real life.' Instead, it is almost as if the implied author in Tess embodies the fate of the First Cause or Immanent Will in some of Hardy's poems: he has brought a world into being, but is powerless to control and direct it in a way conducive to human happiness. And Hardy is deeply concerned for human happiness while the unconscious Will is not. He has, then, the knowledge and spirit of a benign providence without the power. Fielding can assure us that his protagonists, whatever their temporary trials and tribulations, will enjoy a happily-ever-after type of ending. Hardy, however, watches helplessly as his characters progress steadily and unwittingly towards the catastrophe that he knows awaits them.
Thus the very nature of the point of view in Tess makes palpable the fatalism that forms the novel's philosophic underlay. Here the essential dualism of Hardy's outlook becomes apparent: the division between what he felt was intellectually true, and what he deeply wished he could believe. In other words, there is a central conflict in Hardy between his naturalistic philosophy (by which he saw man's desire for fulfilment as, in the nature of things, inevitably doomed to disappointment) and his intense sympathy with human aspirations. It is impossible not to be impressed (along with Lord David Cecil) by 'the honesty which compelled him to accept a philosophy of the universe so repugnant to the deepest instincts of his heart.' In the fictive world of Tess, this tension between the actual and the desired is seen in the dualism of a merciless, unhesitating tragic imagination, and an impotent fervour of charity for its central figure; charity that seems always desiring to protect this figure from the steady, injurious process of the imagination which conceived her, yet can do nothing but painfully watch her destruction.

The impotence of the narrator in his desire to protect Tess is most poignantly felt in moments of special threat or harm to her. Witness the subdued bitterness of the lament following Tess's rape:

24 Hardy the Novelist, p. 156.


26 The confusion over what actually took place between Tess and Alec and its implications for judgement are discussed below. Though most of the evidence points towards seduction, rape is obviously implied in this passage.
Darismess and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awakened.

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter.

As Tess's own people down in those retreats are never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way: 'It was to be.' There lay the pity of it. An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm.(62-3)

Part of the function of this passage is neatly described by Irving Howe, who sees it as serving the purpose 'of what is called in film-making a "dissolve". We are led back, away from the event, so that we may regard it with the brooding helplessness which for Hardy is the ultimate register of trouble.'27 The "dissolve" effect is created by the evocation of vast periods of history (the 'primeval yews and oaks,' the references to biblical history, and to Tess's medieval ancestors).

27 Ob. cit., p. 117
Not only are the vast stretches of time before the event evoked, but the event itself comes to seem far distant in the past; the narrator seems to be looking at it from a point outside time where the ways of the Wessex peasantry are eternally fixed for him — 'As Tess's own people down in those retreats are never tired of saying ...' The last sentence makes the retrospective nature of the point of view quite explicit. Thus we are drawn away from the present to a perspective encompassing all time and from which this particular instance is seen as part of a general, ever-recurring pattern of events that 'many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order.' The movement from the particular to the general human experience takes place in the linear progression of the sentence, 'Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue ... why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus ...' (my italics).

Thus the omniscient commentary here serves a greater function than that of a mere cinematic dissolve. By distancing the scene Hardy is able to give Tess's experience a wider meaning, a deeper resonance. A specific grief becomes a lyrical, universal lament. 28

28 The tense, the future-in-the-past, gives an air of strange certainty to this concluding statement ("An immeasurable social chasm was to divide ... "). We know that the narrator speaks true because he has obviously seen what follows. He is not prophesying from the present; the character's present is past to him. The sentence conveys an overwhelming sense of fatality and finality; something quite irrevocable has happened.

29 Note further how the pathos of the scene is increased by the incongruity of the innocent, idyllic setting ("gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole hopping rabbits and hares") with the deed there perpetrated.
If the scene was dramatized we would simply be overcome with indignation, and have no sense of what it meant in the perspective of history. Hence, though Hardy at times employs conflicting arguments in Tess's defense, it seems to me a gross overstatement to say that the novel is 'inept in its effort to interpret the meaning of Tess's experience.' In passages like this, Hardy does manage to distance himself from Tess, and his omniscient commentary is essential in relating her personal suffering to universal experience. This sense of enlarged vision, of historical perspective, makes the reading of Hardy, for all his pessimism, a liberating experience after much twentieth-century first-person fiction.

III

If Hardy was able to generalize the significance of Tess's experience, he also had a firm conception of its specific pattern. In a notebook entry for 24 October 1892, he wrote, 'The best tragedy - highest tragedy in short - is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE. The tragedies of immoral and worthless people are not of the best.' This statement comes more than a year after serial publication of Tess commenced, but it seems certain that this was the pattern he intended his own novel to exhibit. However, Hardy defines the inevitable in environmental, Darwinian terms so that there is little of the inner conflict that is usually regarded - dominated as our view of the genre is by the towering example of Shakespeare -

31 Later Years, p. 14.
as an essential element of tragedy. Tess is seen as overwhelmed by external forces quite beyond her control. As in The Return of the Native, Hardy seems to have been really seeking pathos, not high tragedy. The novel perfectly fits Norman Friedman's definition of the 'pathetic plot': 'Here we have a sympathetic protagonist who undergoes misfortune through no particular fault of his own, and hence this type is primarily a plot of suffering.'

It is true that Tess to some extent contributes to her own destruction. For instance, when she and Angel part, her submissiveness to his judgement makes his way easy for him; whereas, Hardy points out, had she 'made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically ... he would probably not have withstood her' (212). But though Tess's passivity and fatalism may be necessary elements in her destruction, they are not sufficient elements. It does not seem to me accurate to say, as Evelyn Hardy does, that Tess's 'simplicity and purity are adulterated with a strain likely to bring about her downfall, no matter what circumstances attend her.' The circumstances are clearly crucial to her downfall.

Furthermore, part of the particular pathos of the book lies in the fact that, in so far as Tess contributes to her own tragedy, she does so mostly by her good qualities. It is her impassioned nature, her altruism, her sensitivity, not a self-destructive impulse, that play her into the hands of fate.


The worthiness of Tess has been the most debated issue of the novel, but the sense of tragic inevitability has seldom been denied. This is not to suggest that some particular means to the tragic conclusion (especially Tess's murder of Alec) have not been called in question; they have, and at times justifiably. Yet it remains true that throughout the book there is an all-pervading sense of impending doom, of a catastrophe that can scarcely be avoided regardless of the specific means by which it may be reached. One of the novel's earliest reviewers found the strength of this effect almost unbearable:

... where we have to remonstrate with the author is in the inexorable following of Fate which has distinguished his treatment of the subject. Never once does he falter as he leads his heroine from sorrow to sorrow, making her drink to the last drop of the cup of suffering. He is as remorseless as Fate itself in unfolding the drama of her life. Again and again the reader puts down the book, pained and almost horrified, as he sees the young girl whom he has learned to love being drawn deeper and deeper into the vortex of ruin. But an irresistible fascination impels him to take it up again and to pursue the story to the bitter end. The irresistible feeling is borne in upon the mind as one reads, that thus, and thus only, could the life of Tess Durbeyfield have shaped itself, that when once she had suffered in her innocent youth the cruel wrong which changed her whole career, no other end was open to her than that which she ultimately reached. But the pity of it, and the horror, are. all the greater for that very reason ...

34 See, for instance, Lord David Cecil who, finding the murder beyond the bounds of credibility comments: 'The only explanation can be that Hardy has imagined the work aesthetically as a gradually darkening tragedy, the appropriate climax of which must be a catastrophe as black and brutal as an official hanging. If he can get this emotional effect, he does not care if the factual structure on which it is built is convincing or not' (Hardy the Novelist, p. 118). To me, the strain on credibility is greater in Tess's return to Alec than in her eventual turning upon her seducer.

35 The Speaker, 26 December 1891, in Thomas Hardy and His Readers, p. 61.
It is the reader's growth from dim awareness to crushing certainty of this inexorable Fate that makes the reading of the novel an experience slow and grueling, a drain upon emotion.\footnote{Irving Howe, p. 117.}

Hardy employs a wide variety of methods to create an atmosphere of inevitability. He stresses Tess's vulnerability and passivity—the ease with which she is hurt and her inability to protect herself. This is especially emphasized in the opening phase. The way in which her family use her; her excessive self-accusation at the death of the horse (she regards herself 'in the light of a murderer' [28]); her passive acceptance, despite her own better judgement, of her mother's scheme for the betterment of the family; all suggest a character particularly susceptible to hurt. Tess's own fears augment the reader's forebodings. For instance, our awareness of the threat inherent in her past is enhanced by Tess's realization, amid the happiness of Talbothays, that 'the gloomy spectres' of the past are 'waiting like wolves just outside the circumscribing light' (164). Furthermore, her more general fatalistic comments influence our expectations by creating a pessimistic view of what life could offer in such an imperfect world—it is significant that Tess likens the world to a blighted apple before her 'fall.'

Our expectations are coloured, too, by the prevalence of
misfortune in Tess's world.\textsuperscript{37} The fact that chance is predominantly mischance forces us to see this as typical and to expect 'more of the same.' The particular form of the coincidence often has its own built-in ominousness - as in the case of Tess's encounter with Alec, or in her gaining employment with the man from whom she had fled on the road to Flintcomb-Ash, who had known her at Trantridge and had insulted her in the market town. The numerous omens and portents of the superstitious country folk affect our conception of the world in the same way as the coincidences. Superstitious beliefs are not without basis in reality; they are the product of a naive attempt to explain particular experiences (some one walks under a ladder and then suffers misfortune; therefore it is assumed that the first event is causative).\textsuperscript{38} Hence ill-omens reflect the common occurrence of calamity. The omens and fatalistic views of the country folk derive a certain validity.

\textsuperscript{37} Of course, if the feelings aroused by the novel are to have any real significance, the reader must see this as not merely a fact of the fictional world, but also accept it as a not inaccurate reflection of the real. This is precisely what some critics would deny in regard to Hardy's use of mischance. Arnold Kettle, for instance, remarks: '... the unsatisfactory manipulation of chance ... more than anything else in the novel, arouses our suspicions as to its validity. For the loading of the dice is an admission not so much of cunning as of impotence, a desperate gesture which attempts through artificial stimulation to achieve a consummation otherwise unobtainable' (\textit{An Introduction to the English Novel, II} [London, 1953], p. 61). Such criticism cannot be answered by literary analysis; it depends finally upon a subjective view of what is credible and life-like. It seems to me that \textit{Tess} is much less open to this criticism than \textit{The Return of the Native}. To me, the problem of credibility in \textit{Tess} lies not in the use of coincidence but in the actions of the heroine.

\textsuperscript{38} The way in which the simple mind arrives at a superstitious belief by assuming a causal connection between coincidental events is dramatized in \textit{The Return of the Native}. Susan Nunsuch is persuaded that Eustacia is a witch by her son's taking ill just before Eustacia passes by (p. 361).
from their deep-rootedness in the experience of the rustic community. Therefore, when Tess hears the d'Urberville coach, when the cock crows in the afternoon, when Tess takes an oath on the pillar at Cross-in-Hand, we are made to feel the probability of misfortune - not because each of these events has taken place, but because the event is a reminder of the frequency of misfortune.

The air of tragic inevitability in *Tess* depends, too, upon the strong plot structure. The tightly-linked causal chain of events in the first Phase creates a sense of an irresistible inner dynamic, of forces set in motion and moving relentlessly on to disaster. The seeds of the whole catastrophe are contained in the first two chapters. In Chapter one, Durbeyfield learns of his noble lineage. This leads to his bout of drunkenness which necessitates Tess going to market in his stead, with the result that Prince is killed and the family's source of income lost. In consequence, Tess feels bound to accede to the family's wishes and go to Trantridge where she falls into Alec's clutches - the decisive event in her destiny.

In Chapter two the one factor which could have averted this whole process fails to eventuate; that is, Angel Clare fails to see Tess at the Marlott dance. This abortive encounter emphasizes the irony of fate by suggesting what might so easily have been, how near the tragedy was to being forestalled. The irony is, of course, not appreciated till later in the book; but even at first reading
the incident contributes to the sense of inevitability by making
us feel (though we do not quite see how) that a vital opportunity
has been missed, that certain possibilities are now forever closed. 39
Hardy arouses this feeling by dwelling on the reaction of
the characters (Angel's regret and Tess's disappointment) at a
length out of all proportion to the apparent significance of the
incident, and by placing these reactions at the end of one chapter
and the beginning of the next, so they gain special emphasis.
Tess's sense of the momentousness of the near meeting is such that
years later she is led to wonder if it will prove an 'ill-omen'
(161). 40

The factor most powerfully influencing our expectations in
the novel is, of course, the retrospective viewpoint. The retrot-
spective nature of the point of view is apparent simply in the
past tense; but the narrator continually draws attention to his
knowledge of the future in much more emphatic ways - for instance:

39 It is significant that the title given the novel when first sub-
mitted for serial publication was Too Late Beloved (or Too Late, Belov-

40 This episode raises an interesting side-issue that seems to have
been ignored. Whereas Tess has often been criticized for excessive
reliance on coincidence, the catastrophe depends considerably on lack
of coincidence. For instance, Durbeyfield's strength to work usually
fails 'to coincide with the hours of requirement' (28) - and no irony
seems intended in the comment - so the family become dependent upon
Tess. The narrator's commentary implies that this is a general phe-
nomenon: 'the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely
coincides with the hour for loving ...' (35). Almost-realized or
thwarted good figures even more prominently than positive evil in
Hardy's vision of the factors depriving man of fulfilment.
'Angel Clare rises out of the past not altogether as a distinct figure ...' (96), or 'Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion ...' (42, my italics), or '... the stopt-diapason note which her voice acquired when her heart was in her speech, and which will never be forgotten by those who knew her' (80-1, my italics). The reader is given no specific information about the future, but it is clear that it will involve tragedy.

The degree of privilege the reader enjoys makes the book rich in dramatic irony. We are continually given to see probabilities and dangers of which the characters are oblivious. In the midst of the May-Day dance our expectations are aroused by the commentary which reveals Tess's potentialities and her own ignorance of them: she little divined, we are told, 'when she saw "the soft torments, the bitter sweets, the pleasing pains, and the agreeable distresses" of those girls who had been wooed and won, what she herself was capable of in that kind' (15). After her first meeting with Alec, Tess is pricked by the roses he has given her and considers it 'an ill-omen - the first she had noticed that day' (36). However, the reader has been led to notice many others of a less dubious nature. The danger of which she is unaware is made clear when the narrator remarks that Tess failed to see that Alec 'was potentially the "tragic mischief" of her drama - one who stood fair to be the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life' (34).

Such comments produce an ironic perspective on Tess, but it is
a poignant irony since it involves a character with whom we sympathize deeply being blithely ignorant of looming danger (and therefore powerless to elude it). And this is where the overwhelming pathos of the book lies. It is in the combination of these two points of view: the narrator's complete awareness of, yet inability to avert, what threatens Tess; and Tess's ability to avoid it, yet failure to see it as a threat. Presented in these terms the narrative assumes an almost oppressive air of fatality:

Thus the thing began. Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects — as nearly as humanity can supply the right and desired; yet to him who amongst her acquaintance might have approximated to this kind, she was but a transient impression, half forgotten.

In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. Nature does not often say 'See!' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply 'Here!' to a body's cry of 'Where?' till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game ... in the present case, as in millions, it has not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment; a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing-strange destinies.' (35)

Yet, for all the weight of such a passage, final tragedy is not felt to be unavoidable at the outset. As well as Tess's vulnerability, we see the vigour, freshness, and warm vibrancy of her young life, and are impressed by its rich and varied potential. The disconcerting awareness of how fateful circumstance and narrow convention
will crimp and stifle this promising growth dawns but gradually and reluctantly as we are forced to realize the power of the forces ranged against her. As J. Hillis Miller remarks,

From the point of view of a narrator who looks back at the completed pattern of events from a time much later in the future, those events appear as a necessary sequence. The reader who shares this perspective is led in his turn to see the events as fated.41

This is just right: the reader does not initially accept a tragic outcome as fated from the beginning; he does so only as he is 'led in his turn' to share fully in the narrator's view.

That the reader is brought to this view gradually is important in that it allows him to maintain a fervent (though slowly diminishing) hope for a happy ending. If we knew precisely what the future held for Tess, if we felt the tragedy to be inescapable from the beginning, our response would simply be one of resigned, settled despair in which the heavy irony of Tess's struggles would outweigh their pathos. By merely hinting at a tragic ending which is left non-explicit, Hardy produces within the reader a painful interplay of hope and fear. Since we do not know (but only fear) what will ensue, we feel intense anxiety on Tess's behalf and scrutinize each new experience and each fresh encounter she has for potential dangers of which she is oblivious; we are not allowed to become passive and resigned in face of a known fate. Thus, by placing him in a mid-way position, Hardy keeps the reader's concern for Tess

much more active and alive than it would be if he shared exclusively either the viewpoint of Tess or that of the narrator.

Though Hardy shows superb narrative skill in controlling the reader's desires and expectations (or, more precisely, in playing off one against the other), he was less successful in securing acquiescence in his judgement of Tess. Referring to his evaluative sub-title, Hardy wrote in his fourth and final Preface to the novel:

... it was appended at the last moment, after reading the final proofs, as being the estimate left in a candid mind of the heroine's character - an estimate that nobody would be likely to dispute. It was disputed more than anything else in the book. (4)

What is in dispute is not so much what Tess is as what she does in a number of particular situations. Even those contemporary reviewers who judged Tess's actions harshly, admitted the essential purity of her motives and impulses, the wholesomeness and integrity of her inner life. The picture of Tess (in so far as this can be viewed apart from her crucial deeds) that emerges from the whole book is quite simply of a girl of surpassing loveliness. And, despite her captivating beauty - 'her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape' (11) - it is primarily her moral and spiritual qualities that elicit that description. Her sensitivity and nobility of motive; her self-

42 See, for example, Richard Holt Hutton's conclusion: 'Though pure in instinct, she was not faithful to her pure instinct' (The Spectator, 23 January 1892, Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage, ed. R.G. Cox [London, 1970], p. 193).
sacrificing devotion to others; her steadfast loyalty and courage in face of appalling physical and emotional pressures; her vibrant and deeply-impassioned nature; all give her portrait an overwhelming emotional and moral force. The strength and goodness of her character are strikingly apparent in her influence upon others: no woman 'with a heart bigger than a hazel-nut' could be 'antagonistic to Tess in her presence, the influence which she exercised over those of her own sex being of a warmth and strength quite unusual, curiously overpowering the less worthy feminine feelings of spite and rivalry' (246).

Above all, it is in relation to Angel Clare that the full intensity and purity of her being are seen. As C. Day Lewis remarks, Tess is 'Hardy's most exalted vision of all that love could be.' It is just this vision that Clare fails to grasp: 'he did not know at that time the full depth of her devotion, its single-mindedness, its meekness; what long-suffering it guaranteed, what honesty, what endurance, what good faith' (179). There is 'hardly a touch of earth in her love for Clare' (162). Transcending all narrow, socially-codified concepts of worthiness, Tess becomes for the reader a creature of infinite worth; she is a person so precious that her death seems not just a personal loss but an impoverishment of life, a reduction in human possibilities. Tess has such force not because she is an idealized, saintly figure, but because,
for all her goodness, she is intensely human, a flesh and blood creature susceptible to human failings and foibles. She can be impetuous, hot-tempered, proud, self-indulgent, overly passive and self-abasing. Hardy's achievement here is so remarkable because it is so uncommon: goodness made both credible and likeable is a rarity in all literature, but amongst the ranks of Victorian heroines it is a quality well-nigh unobtainable.

It is upon precisely such a distinction between what Tess is and what she does on certain specific occasions that Hardy seeks to base his evaluation of her. He is concerned to establish 'that there is a morality of being as well as of doing,' and repeatedly emphasizes that Tess is to be judged on her aims and intentions rather than on her deeds. The narrator points out Clare's shortcoming in failing to see that Tess's 'moral value' was 'to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency' (222). It is the measure of Clare's moral growth in the novel that he comes to make this outlook his own. He recognizes finally that the 'beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed' (282), and that Tess must be judged 'constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed' (306). Even Alec is used to reinforce this view when he admits to Tess that he could not despise her "on account of

44 Irving Howe, p. 110.
The major obstacle to the acceptance of this notion of morality is that it presupposes the absence of human free will. So long as the individual is free, then action and intention can be expected to coincide, and the distinction between a morality of being and that of doing becomes untenable. Hardy regarded man's degree of free will as minimal, to be sure; but he did not deny it completely. In his deterministic view, the will of man is for the most part subservient to the 'Universal Will,' but 'whenever it happens that all the rest of the Great Will is in equilibrium the minute portion called one person's will is free.' In more metaphorical vein he wrote, 'Life is what we make it as Whist is what we make it; but not as Chess is what we make it; which ranks higher as a purely intellectual game than either Whist or Life.' It is true that almost invariably Hardy's characters have the cards stacked against them; yet, despite the predominance of the fortuitous in the game of life, there is some scope for human judgement and planned action. The question, of course, is does Tess have even this limited degree of free will at those points where


46 By 'free will' I mean freedom of action as distinct from freedom of choice. A character may freely choose, and then discover that circumstances do not allow that choice to be realized (as so often happens in The Return of the Native). To presuppose the absence of freedom of choice would, of course, render any notion of morality meaningless.

47 Later Years, p. 125. See too "Apology" to Late Lyrics and Earlier, Personal Writings, p. 53.

48 Later Years, p. 96.
she infringes the accepted 'morality of doing,' or is she so completely subject to external forces that the 'morality of doing' ceases to apply. It seems to me that at only one of these points is Tess's freedom wholly denied; therefore her 'doing' cannot be regarded as irrelevant to a consideration of the morality of her being. In a thoroughly logical and strict view, then, Tess cannot be judged as completely pure, and Hardy's sub-title must appear misguided.

However, such a cold-blooded moral appraisal would indicate a totally inadequate response to the novel. As Benjamin Sankey remarks, 'the point is not that Tess is entirely innocent but rather that her weakness and errors have no direct logical relation to her fate.'\(^49\) What matters is not that we regard Tess as absolutely perfect, but see her failings as understandable and pardonable lapses which do not negate her essential goodness. Hardy strives to make the pressures bearing on Tess seem so great that the reader will readily excuse her actions while honouring her contrary intentions. The novel is a triumph of rhetorical art because, for the most part, the reader does forgive Tess's lapses in view of the circumstances and continues to regard her as essentially (if not perfectly) pure. Yet the work is flawed to the extent that in two places Hardy does not wholly succeed in eliciting this response.

\(^49\) The Major Novels of Thomas Hardy, p. \(\frac{34}{4}\).
The actions of the heroine which contemporary critics saw as invalidating the sub-title are six in number: her initial succumbing to Alec; her agreeing to marry Angel; the failure to confess her past; her failure to apply to Angel's parents for aid; her return to Alec; and, finally, the murder. Hardy's handling of each of these episodes will be considered separately, though not in this order.

The Talbothays section of the novel has been universally acknowledged as one of the finest in all Hardy. It is in the intensely-realized scenes at the dairy that the mutual attraction of Tess and Angel, the sense of powerful forces drawing them together is made palpable. Omniscient commentary is freely employed to interpret the scenes. Throughout the sequence Tess's surrender to her passion for Angel is seen as inevitable; she is moved by irresistible, impersonal forces working through all nature. As she journeys to Talbothays the resurgence of life and hope in Tess is seen as but a part of the larger rebirth of spring: 'some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpended youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and bringing with it hope, and the invincible instinct towards self-delight' (85). She is mastered by the 'irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life' (87). And again: 'The "appetite for joy" which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed, was not to be
controlled by vague lucubrations over the social rubric' (161). Here Hardy's imagery powerfully conveys the futility of the individual's struggle against such forces. The fated quality of Tess and Angel's union is made evident from the beginning by the retrospective viewpoint: 'All the while they were converging, under an irresistible law, as surely as two streams in one vale' (109). Since sexual passion operates as an impersonal force through the whole of nature, all the milkmaids succumb to it regardless of their wills - it is 'an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law' (124). Its power is intensified in the sensuous environment of the dairy: 'Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Froom Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate' (125). And, we are repeatedly reminded, Tess is inherently 'the most impassioned of them all' (132).

Not only the environment, but also the intimate daily contact with Angel, increases the pressure on Tess: 'Living in such close relations, to meet meant to fall into endearment; flesh and blood could not resist it' (130). She must bow to 'the inevitable result of proximity, the necessity of loving him' (144). The unique quality of Clare's character, the rarity of such a man in such a setting, the ardour of his attentions (she is wooed 'as no milkmaid was ever wooed before by such a man' [153]) all contribute to our acceptance of Tess's surrender. Further justification is given by the tenacity of her resistance, by her repeated refusals,
by her self-sacrificing attempt to avoid Clare's presence and to recommend to his notice the other dairymaids.

Hardy induces a similarly sympathetic response to Tess's failure to confess her past before the marriage by showing this, too, to be the product of the 'irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere':

Every see-saw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears, was a voice that joined with nature in revolt against her scrupulousness. Reckless, inconsiderate acceptance of him; to close with him at the altar, revealing nothing, and chance discovery; to snatch ripe pleasure before the iron teeth of pain could have time to shut upon her: that was what love counselled ...

The strength of her conscientious impulse to confession is clearly apparent, but at the vital moment her courage fails and the 'instinct of self-preservation' (159) triumphs. The responsibility for her decision to remain silent is shifted by the advice of her mother, 'the only person in the world who had any shadow of right to control her action' (162). Just as chance plays a large part in throwing Angel and Tess together, so it is chance (plus Angel's dominant personality) which thwarts Tess when she does attempt to confess - her letter disappears under the carpet. Ultimately, of course, Tess is justified by the fact that she does confess when first given the opportunity after marriage, though it is then too late.

Throughout this portion of the novel, the omniscient point of view is essential in providing inside views of Tess so that we see the full force of her conscientious impulses and the fearfulness of her struggle with forces and desires too strong for her.
It is through lack of this inside information that Clare reacts so harshly to Tess's disclosure. And, conversely, it is the knowledge of Tess's prolonged, agonized struggles of conscience (together with the failure to realize Clare's ignorance of them) that causes the reader to condemn Clare's reaction. Early in their relationship the narrator's view ironically reveals Tess and Angel's lack of knowledge of each other in their failure to see the cause of each other's melancholy outlook: 'neither having the clue to the other's secret, they were respectively puzzled at what each revealed' (106). But if his ignorance makes Clare's misjudgement of Tess comprehensible, it does not excuse it: Tess's goodness is so transparent that we feel he is being morally obtuse in not recognizing it.50

The more rigid of contemporary reviewers regarded Tess's failure while at Flintcomb-Ash to apply to Angel's parents for aid as a serious fault. But such a view indicates insensitive reading. The visit to Emminster is presented almost wholly from Tess's point of view; we see each incident as it impinges upon her — her sense of being 'hounded up that hill like a scorned thing' by Angel's brothers, her reading 'the scene as her own condemnation,' her

50 It is true that the 'spectral, half-compounded, aqueous' light of dawn in the fields leads Angel to idealize Tess (110-11). And it later becomes clear that it is Tess's apparent failure to accord with his idealized image which causes Angel to reject her. But Hardy's point is that Tess is essentially much closer to Angel's image than he realizes. His idealized view overlooks the physicality of Tess, but is not false to her spiritual and moral stature.
feeling that the omens are 'untoward' (250). The emphasis is all on Tess's sensitivity, the difficulty of the circumstances, not on her pride or timidity in failing to ask for assistance. Her failure is due to loss of nerve, yet the blame is placed upon 'the beloved man whose conventional standard of judgement had caused her all these latter sorrows' (250). The wider view of the omniscient narrator is used not so much to judge Tess's behaviour as to reveal its poignant irony in light of the facts of which she is unaware; namely, that her 'present condition was precisely one which would have enlisted the sympathies of old Mr. and Mrs. Clare' (250).

Despite the quibbles of early critics, Hardy's rhetorical success at these points in the novel is not seriously questioned today. Even if Tess cannot be regarded as quite faultless, the pressure of circumstances and the integrity of her intentions are made sufficiently convincing to excuse her actions. However, Hardy shows less sureness of touch at the other crucial points in Tess's career.

Writing of the seduction, Sankey concludes that 'Hardy wants not so much to exonerate Tess as to make her acceptance of d'Urberville a comprehensible and relatively minor lapse.'51 This is a plausible and realistic assessment of Hardy's rhetorical aims. It appears, however, that at the last minute Hardy lost his nerve, deciding that his readers would not be prepared to forgive such a 'lapse,' and therefore altered his case from the defensibility to

the complete *innocence* of Tess's actions. Since the very nature of the episode would not credibly support such an evaluation, Hardy's defence of Tess after her return from Trantridge oscillates between the two. The result is confusion over what took place: was it seduction or rape? The latter is implied by the comments of the harvesters on Tess's illegitimate child ("A little more than persuading had to do wi' the coming o't, I reckon. There were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in *The Chase*; and it mid ha' gone hard wi' a certain party if folks had come along"

and by the narrator's commentary on the scene in *The Chase* - 'Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time' (63). The great weight of evidence, however, points in the other direction. Tess leaves Trantridge some weeks subsequent to the night ride in *The Chase* (63), and later Alec speaks of 'the whole unconventional business of our time at Trantridge' (261). Some degree of response on her part is implied by the way Tess blames herself rather than Alec ('if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now!' [65]); and 'a religious sense of a certain moral validity in the previous union'

52 Note, too, this cancelled passage in the manuscript: 'To be sure, the heartless coercion practised upon her in those inexperienced days of girlhood was sufficient excuse for her to her own conscience; but Angel Clare's fastidiousness could, she thought, never regard with anything but contempt a woman who had given way even under the extreme pressures of physical mastery and the mask of cousinship' (Quoted in Lois Deacon and Terry Coleman, *Providence and Mr. Hardy* [London, 1966], p. 178).
makes her feel it wrong to marry Angel. At the encounter with Alec, she is overcome by 'the strange enervating conviction that her seducer confronted her' (252).

If, as the evidence suggests, the possibility of rape must be ruled out (despite Hardy's attempts to obscure the issue), where does the case for Tess lie? At this point Hardy bases his argument for Tess's moral innocence on her sexual innocence; that is, she is guiltless because she is ignorant of sex. So, in response to her mother's prim judgement that she should have been more careful, Tess bursts out, "How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me?" (69); and to Angel she pleads, "I was a child — a child when it happened! I knew nothing of men" (194). But this argument is hardly convincing in view of the frank, uninhibited nature of country life and conversation at Marlott and Trantridge, and, even if granted, does not account for Tess staying on with Alec for some weeks after the night in the Chase.

Although the evidence is contradictory and the event beclouded, a reasonably coherent picture of what probably took place can be pieced together. It appears that Alec took advantage of Tess's inexperience — "what a blind young thing you were as to possibilities!" (261) he says later. After his conversion he takes all the responsibility: "Scamp that I was to foul that innocent life! The whole blame was mine ..." (261). Tess is seen as victimized — 'caught
during her days of immaturity like a bird in a springe' (165) - but also briefly, unwittingly attracted to him - 'My eyes were dazed by you for a little'' (65). In short, she

had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run away. (69)

This view of events raises problems of both judgement and credibility. Tess's yielding to her passion for Angel is accepted because we see the extraordinary pressures bearing upon her. It is precisely because Hardy fails to show Tess under the sway of such forces in her relations with Alec that we cannot accept her capitulation as justifiable or credible.53 In drawing the curtains over this episode in Tess's life, Hardy was obviously bowing to contemporary notions of decorum, but it seriously weakens his case for Tess - and consequently the whole novel. The problem of credibility is made more acute by the fact that not only do we not see how Tess is attracted to Alec, but at times Hardy goes out of his way to stress that she is not attracted. For instance, she is repeatedly

53 The richly suggestive scene in which Alec plies Tess with strawberries and roses implies much about Tess's unconscious instincts and the way Alec arouses them. In the words of Irving Howe, 'the passage radiates with suggestions of dominance, patronage, sexuality. Tess, stirred and bewildered, "obeyed like one in a dream"' (Op.cit., p. 115). (Incidentally, this scene was one of those chosen for illustration in the serial version - whether on Hardy's direction or not is uncertain). However, despite its symbolic force, this is but an isolated incident, and we get no consistent sense of Tess as pressured by an unwilled attraction.
seen to resist his advances (even to the extent of walking six miles on foot rather than ride with him), and the narrator comments that growing familiarity with Alec 'removed much of her original shyness of him, without, however, implanting any feeling which could engender shyness of a new and tenderer kind' (51). It is asking too much of the reader to credit that the high-minded, resolute Tess revealed in the rest of the book would succumb to a man for whom she had no feeling.

After the event, Hardy seeks to excuse Tess by going quite beyond the bounds of conventional morality and appealing to nature as a moral norm. This results in special pleading and in an inconsistent view of nature that has been noted by most critics who have written on the novel.54 One the one hand, Tess's sense of guilt in the natural world is regarded as illusory since she 'had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly' (72). Her depression is based on 'nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature' (233); but 'for the world's opinion' her experiences with Alec 'would have been simply a liberal education' (84).

But to make nature a moral norm implies a beneficent, ethically-ordered cosmos, whereas Hardy's characteristic outlook is of nature as an indifferent, amoral process. He sarcastically queries Wordsworth's authority for speaking of 'Nature's holy plan' (19), and sees the 'circumstantial will against enjoyment' as everywhere combating 'the inherent will to enjoy' (238). All the characters suffer under 'cruel Nature's law' (124).

This contradiction in outlook is not fundamental to Hardy, but merely the result of his urgent need to justify Tess by proving society's judgement of her wrong. Taking a detached view, Hardy is quite aware that 'to model our conduct on Nature's apparent conduct ... can only bring disaster to humanity.' He sees no simple dichotomy between a beneficent nature and a cruel, harsh society; rather society should, in his view, be structured to meet human needs and to compensate for the 'universal harshness' (283) of things. Such a congenial, helpful society is to be seen at Talbothays dairy. At various points, then, Hardy simplifies and distorts his view of life in order to exculpate Tess. For most of the novel, nature and society (along with the characters) are judged by their effect upon Tess. But since he fails to establish the validity of the subjective standard of judgement in relation to Tess's seduction, he has to reverse the process and seek to justify her by reference to an outside standard, that of nature.

Though Hardy's argument for Tess breaks down at this point, the rhetorical failure is not fatal to the book. What matters most is that the reader sees Tess's 'fall' as not representing a final truth

55 Later Years, p. 98.
about her, but as a youthful failure from which she can and does recover. Hardy supports Tess's feeling that the 'recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone' (84). In other words, Tess's innate goodness is not to be seen as negated by her fall; she repents of the past and is able to rise above it; her lapse is both temporary and recoverable. In fact, there is even considerable justification for seeing it as something of a 'fortunate fall.' Tess's traumatic experience propels her to a precocious maturity, enriching and intensifying her inner life:

Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman. Symbols of reflectiveness passed into her face, and a note of tragedy at times into her voice. Her eyes grew larger and more eloquent. She became what would have been called a fine creature; her aspect was fair and arresting; her soul that of a woman whom the turbulent experiences of the last year or two had quite failed to demoralize. (84)

So it proves that her 'passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest' (105).

But the tragedy of her life lies in the fact that, though she may recover morally and emotionally from the past, she can never finally escape it. There is no sense in Hardy (as there is in George Eliot) of our sins justly finding us out, of a moral law of retribution. Rather Hardy feels that people ought to be permitted

56 This is what gave Tess so revolutionary an impact in the literary world. Till then the fact of her fall was regarded as the final word on the fallen woman, and in no novel had such a figure appeared as unqualified heroine.

57 Cf. Irving Howe: 'Tess's eye is now keener, her tongue sharper, her mind quicker. Innocence lost, she takes upon herself the weight of awareness' (117).
to escape their pasts, but more often than not (as with Tess) their attempts to do so are thwarted. Our past mistakes are;
as it were, hostages given to Time who exacts an inordinate ran-
som. An initial failure leaves a character more vulnerable to the capriciousness of men and of fate.

So it is when Tess is at her most vulnerable, deserted by Angel, jobless, with the full responsibility of the younger members of the family upon her shoulders, that her past catches up on her and plays her back into Alec's clutches. Throughout the sixth Phase, the appalling pressures driving her back to Alec are force-
fully realized. Her growing sense of abandonment by Angel climax-
es in her bitter letter of reproach, which implies she has given up all hope of him. A strong air of inevitability is created by the way Alec's religious scruples slowly crumple before his resurgent desire. This part of the novel abounds in images of the hunter and the hunted, which reflect the relative positions of Alec and Tess and are caught up in the extraordinary climactic scene on the rick, where, after a violent gesture of defiance, Tess sinks help-
lessly before her tormentor -

'Now punish me!' she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck. 'Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim - that's the law!' (275)

The burden of responsibility for her younger brothers and sisters placed upon Tess by her parents' fecklessness is strongly apparent in the opening phase. Her father's death and the consequent ejec-
tion of the family from their home makes the burden on Tess well-nigh
unbearable and comes, unluckily, just at the time when d'Urberville is most importunate.

There is, then, sufficient evidence to surround Tess's return to Alec with an air of inevitability. But again Hardy bows to the demands of decorum and undermines his case for Tess by cutting off his narrative too soon. The reader is denied a direct view of Tess's decision; so her motives and the extenuating pressures can, at the last moment, only be implied. The needs of her family would alone be sufficient to justify Tess's surrender, but Alec at no point makes his aid to the family conditional upon it. As with the initial seduction, Hardy fails to clinch his defence of Tess by failing to show, at the vital moment of decision, what makes her not responsible for her actions.58

As we have seen, Tess's act of murder is often regarded as a gross improbability, as an action quite 'out of character' for the sensitive girl who "never could bear to hurt a fly or a worm" (323). This is precisely the view Hardy wishes to enforce. In the original Preface to the Fifth Edition he attacked those critics of Tess who

58 In response to an interviewer's attack on Tess's return to Alec, Hardy made his judgement quite explicit: "I still maintain that her innate purity remained intact to the very last; though I frankly own that a certain outward purity left her on her last fall. I regarded her then as being in the hands of circumstances, not morally responsible, a mere corpse drifting with the current to her end" (Raymond Blathwayt, "A Chat with the Author of Tess," Black and White, 27 Aug. 1892, Thomas Hardy and His Readers, p. 95).
'drag in, as a vital point, the acts of a woman in her last days of desperation, when all her doings lie outside her normal character.'

But just how does he attempt to show the murder as out of character? Firstly, by presenting Tess as overcome by a dark instinctive impulse that has its roots deep in heredity. Her deed, done in a 'moment of mad grief,' is the result of some 'obscure strain in the d'Urberville blood' (319). The contradiction is palpable: if Tess is acting under the influence of a hereditary trait, she is acting very much in character. And, as Paris points out, even if she cannot be blamed for behaviour which stems from an involuntary impulse, we cannot then regard her character as essentially sound. Indeed, Tess as a victim of heredity cannot be judged at all; she is 'as amoral as the cosmic process of which she is so totally a part.' Hardy is led into this logical dilemma by his desire to give the murder an air of inevitability. To this end he employs the recurrent images of blood surrounding Tess, and the legend of the d'Urberville coach. But in introducing the hereditary motif he unintentionally suggests an essential flaw in Tess's character.

Nevertheless, the logical contradiction in Hardy's defence of the murder is obscured by the other factors involved. The reader

59 This passage, omitted in the 1912 edition, occurs in the third paragraph: '... their own Christianity; and drag in ... normal character. Others dissent ...' (2). See The Pocket Library edition, p. VIII.

60 See, too, Hardy's comment to Blathwayt: 'The murder that Tess commits is the hereditary quality, to which I more than once allude, working out in this impoverished descendant of a once noble family. That is logical' (Thomas Hardy and His readers, p. 92).

61 Paris, p. 72.
tends to see the hereditary impulse to violence as not really of
the stuff of Tess's nature, but merely as a latent trait whose
recrudescence is justified by the exceptional emotional pressures
upon her. To some extent Hardy is able to play upon stock re-
ponses - the melodramatic tradition of the wronged woman finally
turning upon her seducer. Yet it is not enough to rely upon con-
vention; Hardy must make credible Tess's individual motivation to
murder. It seems to me that in this he largely succeeds. Tess
is driven to such extremity by her desire to win back Angel and by
her view of Alec as standing between them. After Tess's confession
on the wedding night, Angel asked, "How can we live together while
that man lives? - he being your husband in Nature, and not I. If
he were dead it might be different...." (203-4).62 Tess's an-
guish at apparently having lost Angel a second time is poignantly
captured as the two silently confront each other in bewildered grief:
'They stood fixed, their baffled hearts looking out of their eyes
with a joylessness pitiful to see. Both seemed to implore something
to shelter them from reality' (313). Afterwards, Angel sees that
it was the extraordinary 'strength of her affection for himself'
which had 'apparently extinguished her moral sense altogether'(319).

62 Here Hardy's revisions show him to be working to strengthen
Tess's motivation. In the 1895 edition the sentence, "If he were
dead it might be different ....,"' was added; and the original,
"in the sight of nature, if not really,"' was replaced by "in
Nature, and not I."
In the case of the murder, Hardy succeeds with the problem he could not overcome in relation to Tess's fall and her return to Alec; namely, how to show the immense emotional pressures on Tess leading to the event while avoiding direct presentation of the event itself. This he achieves by limiting the viewpoint to that of Mrs. Brooks, the inquisitive landlady. Thus we are let into Tess's inner state by overhearing her anguished soliloquy, and avoid seeing the murder without Hardy having recourse to an artificial cut in the narrative.

After the murder, the novel's drive to catastrophe markedly accelerates. The inevitability of doom is stressed by Tess and Angel's childlike heedlessness: 'there was an impractical vagueness in their movements throughout the day; neither one of them seemed to consider any question of effectual escape, disguise, or long concealment. Their every idea was temporary and unforfending, like the plans of two children' (320). This sense of fatality distils considerable pathos from their brief idyll of fulfilment before retribution overtakes them. Despite much carping and criticism of earlier episodes, most contemporary reviewers acknowledged the power of the audaciously successful Stonehenge scene, culminating in Tess's quiet resignation before her captors - "I am ready."

The final chapter displays admirable control of tone in Hardy's handling of omniscience. The relatively impersonal viewpoint, the spareness of the narrative, draw from the reader the missing (in the sense of non-explicit) emotional quotient. The wider
perspective of the narrator's view ('And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing') grants a peculiar resonance to the scene, by playing off Tess's relative obscurity against our heightened sense of her importance. The quiet, measured pace of the prose evokes with moving dignity Hardy's sense (in which we share) of personal bereavement.

Viewed as a whole, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is eminently successful in its rhetorical appeal for the protagonist, but is flawed because at two vital points Hardy fails to provide adequate grounds for his judgement of Tess. As if aware of the weakness, he occasionally resorts to unsupported and illogical direct pleading on her behalf. Yet, as even its detractors acknowledged, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a book of enormous power; and the strength of the response it elicits carries us over the deficiencies in Hardy's argument. In general, Hardy's evaluation of his heroine is admirably supported by the dramatic portrait, and with such a heroine a subjective standard of judgement seems quite adequate. A detached view of isolated incidents produces doubts, but a detached view of Tess is something the book never allows for long. Tess becomes so intensely real through superbly visualized scenes that the reader's critical impulse is paralyzed. Her surpassing loveliness and her inevitable doom are both so palpable that any desire to judge dissolves in humble pity. As we grow toward the timeless perspective of the narrator, and Tess's story rises into the realm of eternity, our outraged social norms seem of infinite unimportance; they are dwarfed by the moral grandeur of Hardy's enduring vision of 'A Pure Woman.'
PART II

GEORGE ELIOT
Amidst Victorian novelists, George Eliot is distinguished by the high seriousness with which she approached her art. In a society without the wide variety of modern diversions, the novel in the nineteenth century was called upon to bear much more of the burden of popular entertainment than it is today. Many writers were, of course, content merely to supply popular wants; for them Wilkie Collins' famous adage was a sufficient programme: 'Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait.' Even major novelists like Dickens, Thackeray, and Hardy, who at times chafed under the consequent restrictions of serial publication or the inhibitions of the family audience, regarded public entertainment as an essential part of their function. It is a far cry from Dickens, revelling in melodramatic and sentimental public readings from his works, to the lofty disdain of the modern novelist who proclaims that 'true artists write only for themselves.'

George Eliot stands apart from both these attitudes. In writing she was no doubt partly motivated by the impulse every creative artist feels to come to terms with personal experience; but her primary concern lay with the moral impact of her work upon her readers. For her, authorship entailed awesome responsibilities since the 'man or woman who publishes writings inevitably assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind.'¹ Because of this great power for good or ill over

the public mind, she saw the writer as exercising an almost priestly function in society, and was unmerciful on those who she felt betrayed 'the sacredness of the writer's art.'

This consistently serious view of the novelist's role stands in marked contrast to the cavalier or mercenary attitude to fiction occasionally evinced by Dickens and Hardy.

To some readers this high seriousness has been a stumbling block since it leads, in their view, to excessive moralizing in the novels. But, despite her outstanding intellectual gifts and the unashamedly moral purpose of her work, George Eliot was intent upon avoiding an openly didactic tone; her concern, as an 'aesthetic' rather than a 'doctrinal' teacher, was not to inculcate ideas, but to arouse the nobler emotions.

To this end her ideas had to be made 'thoroughly incarnate' in a fully realized, concrete vision of life: 'I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic - if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram - it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.'

The effects she sought were to be dependent upon the reader's experience of the total fictional world she created:

Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or dialogue [anything] which is not part of the structure of my books, I have there sinned against

2 "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," Essays, p.323.
4 Letters, IV, 300.
my own laws.... Unless I am condemned by my own principles, my books are not properly separable into 'direct' and 'indirect' teaching.  

The nature of the influence George Eliot sought to exert over her audience is clearly apparent in a general statement on the artist's role:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.... Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.

Written in the very year in which she began to produce fiction, this statement could well be taken as George Eliot's artistic manifesto. It is reinforced by a more personal avowal in a letter to Charles Bray:

If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.

Such remarks reveal George Eliot's essentially pragmatic view of fiction. At the same time her art reflects an uncompromisingly mimetic aesthetic. Chapter xvii of Adam Bede ('In which the Story pauses a Little') contains a famous (or notorious) dissertation on the author's novelistic aims. Rejected the idealistic treatment of life that would 'represent things as they never have been and never will be,'

7 Letters, III, 111.
she professes her artistic kinship with the painters of the Dutch School in their sympathetic and faithful depictions of commonplace reality.

Her novels, she says, attempt to give

a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective: the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

Her overwhelming concern, then, is to provide as true and objective a 'reflection' of reality as is possible allowing for the unavoidable distortions of subjective vision. Reality for George Eliot consisted in the natural, quotidian, the typical. In her art she sought to follow quietly and faithfully 'the stream of fact and of life' through its complex and minute convolutions. She eschews the exceptional and eccentric, as well as the imaginative heightening, of Dickens and Hardy.

At first sight it might appear that George Eliot's realistic credo and her moral purpose are at odds. But she was particularly concerned not to sacrifice truthfulness to didacticism, and, in fact, criticised the author of Constance Herbert for falsifying life in order to encourage a moral (the imperativeness of duty) in which she herself believed.

8 Cf. the famous mirror image in Middlemarch which suggests that reality is inevitably rearranged in the light of the individual ego: 'Your pier-glass ... will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun.... These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent ...' (Ch.xxvii, p.281. All page references in this and subsequent chapters are to the World's Classics edition). As various critics have pointed out, the mirror is used repeatedly in Middlemarch as an image of the way individuals project their needs and illusions upon the outside world. See, for example, Barbara Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot (London, 1959), pp. 223-6.

10 See Essays, pp.134-5.
In her conception, realism and moralism are two sides of the one coin; for, as she wrote to her publisher, John Blackwood, 'The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly.' George Eliot attacks the idealisation of much art, not simply because it falsifies life, but because in so doing it misleads our sympathies:

It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions - about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.

Fidelity to life is essential to the realization of the novel's serious purpose, for 'we need a true conception of the popular character to guide our sympathies rightly.'

But it is not sufficient to speak merely of truth to life; the novel must be faithful to everyday life, true in its presentation of ordinary people, since, as the author reminds her readers, 'it is these people - amongst whom your life is passed - that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love.' The novelist thereby plays a crucial role in shaping society:

In this world there are so many of these common, coarse people, who have no picturesque, sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore let Art always remind us of them ...  

11 Letters, II, 362. This was written vis-à-vis Scenes of Clerical Life, but would clearly represent George Eliot's attitude to all her fiction.
13 Essays, p.272.
14 Adam Bede, Ch. xvii.
15 Ibid., Ch. xvii.
George Eliot was quite aware that in refusing to idealize or sentimentalize her world she was rendering more difficult the task of securing the reader's involvement. She shares with Hardy an indestructible belief in the dignity and latent tragedy of the most insignificant of lives; but she must work to make us see this value, for

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well waddled with stupidity. 16

Eliot's art is designed to strip off some of the wadding, to sharpen our 'vision and feeling of all ordinary human life' so that we identify with the 'common, coarse people' both within the novels and without. The artist then, must be more than a mere reflector of surface reality, for it is by her own imaginative penetration of the real that George Eliot quickens our insight and thereby induces sympathy for what was previously regarded as dull and unlovable. To use her own description of the 'great artist' as teacher, she gives us her 'higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.' 17

The role of the artist's more powerful vision in illuminating experience by intensification is made explicit in Middlemarch (again with the image of the lens):

16 Middlemarch, Ch. XX, p. 207.
17 Review of Westward Ho!, Essays, p. 126.
Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs. Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. (Ch. vi, p.58)

This is an important qualification to the mirror image from *Adam Bede*; and shows that, while quite removed from Hardyan subjectivity, George Eliot was not intent either on photographic realism. But any metaphor is ultimately unsatisfactory; for George Eliot's microscopic concentration is centred on psychological and moral processes, not on physical details as in Hardy, and her vision is at the same time much more free-ranging and all-embracing than the lens image suggests.

U.C. Knoepflmacher, imbued with the critic's delight in paradoxes, observes that 'Throughout her career, George Eliot's desire to be faithful to the conditions of actual existence clashed with her efforts to transcend or dignify the meanness of those conditions.' 18 But to a great degree, her very faithfulness (that is, her close and continued attention) to the conditions of actual existence is precisely what dignifies those conditions. By illuminating the irreducible reality of insignificant lives in their own terms, she convinces us of the importance of their feelings and predicaments. The all-encompassing perspective of the author finds significance in even the apparently mean and trivial, for 'there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large

18 George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), pp. 34-5.
vision of relations.¹⁹

One of the most impressive qualities of George Eliot's novels is their ability to elicit a sympathetic response to the most unlovely of characters. Such people as the hard and vindictive Tom Tulliver; Bulstrode, the religious hypocrite; Casaubon, the bitterly suspicious and dessicated pedant - all prisoners of their narrow egos - draw our sympathy because we are made thoroughly to understand them and the world as it appears through their eyes. Manipulation of the omniscient point of view is, of course, vital to this effect. Not only does the narrator draw us into the inner lives of the characters, but, by continual reference to the world outside the novel, she involves the reader, making him realize how much he has in common with the characters. The frequent appeals to our experience of real life also reinforce the sense of the reality of the fictional world: it is placed on a par with the real; the same attitudes and standards are carried over from one to the other.²⁰ This effect will be examined in more detail in relation to the specific novels.

Despite her emphasis on the actual and her rejection of the ideal, George Eliot does not present life 'in the raw.' Instead, she carefully selects her materials because, in her view, 'no one can maintain

¹⁹ The Mill on the Floss, Bk.IV, Ch.i, p.255. All page references in this and subsequent chapters are to the Everyman's Library edition.

²⁰ Cf. W.J. Harvey: 'the "illusion of reality" aimed at in this kind of fiction is not that of a self-contained world, a fictional microcosm intact and autonomous as in the Jamesian mode, but ... a world coterminous with the "real" world, with the factual macrocosm. The author bridges the two worlds; we accept her opinions about the real world ... on the same level and in the same way as we accept the opinions of [a character] from within the novel' (The Art of George Eliot [London, 1961], p.71). The last statement seems to me doubtful, but generally Harvey's discussion of 'the omniscient author convention' in George Eliot is very helpful.
that all fact is a fit subject for art.' Both the selection and treatment of materials are governed by her moral purpose. Since 'moral nausea' results from scenes of 'unmitigated vice,' she argues that the writer must not only limit the sphere of what he portrays but also adjust his 'mode of treatment' in order to present redeeming qualities even in the worst actions, and thereby to 'call forth our best sympathies.' The art which is 'really moral in its influence' is that exemplified by Goethe which 'without exaggeration' portrays 'humanity - mixed and erring, and self-deluding, but saved from utter corruption by the salt of some noble impulse, some disinterested effort, some beam of good nature.'

This, then, is to be the sphere of George Eliot's realism: a middle ground, clear of extremes, where life is mixed and complex, and human character neither impossibly good nor irredeemably bad. According to her aesthetic, the author's mind is more than a mirror held up to nature; it is a lens which focuses on a carefully demarcated area of experience, and seeks to illuminate that as accurately as possible in order to deepen and extend the observer's sympathetic understanding. The mimetic and pragmatic impulses are inextricably linked.

II

The realistic aesthetic so strongly espoused in George Eliot's letters, essays, and reviews finds fairly consistent embodiment in her

own art. The novels are undramatic, even, and 'low-key' in tone, quiet and steady in movement, muted in their climaxes. Hers is the everyday world that is shared by the majority of her readers. We are not struck (as we are in reading Dickens or Hardy) by a vision of a new world, or of the real world in a totally new light. Certainly we are made to see and feel things to which we were previously blind and impervious, but the landmarks are familiar; we are not disturbed by a radical adjustment of outlook. The reader, therefore, tends to give imaginative consent to her world more readily than to that of Dickens or of Hardy, though his involvement may be less intense than that which they finally induce. 22

George Eliot's practice accords well with her desire to avoid a falsely idealized view of character. The black and white distinctions between villain and heroine made in Dickens' stylized world are not here to be found; for, in her view, 'the line between the virtuous and vicious, so far from being a necessary safeguard to morality, is itself an immoral fiction.' 23 In characterization especially, the moral ends of her works demand fidelity to common life: 'My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgement, pity, and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character.' 24 Even characters like

22 Here, of course, the author's relation to the fictional world is all important. Dickens and Hardy are much less detached, and consequently the reader is more drawn into the immediate, concrete experience of their creation. George Eliot's greater detachment results in greater comprehension of though less intense emotional participation in her world.


24 Letters, II, 299.
Adam Bede, Maggie Tulliver, and Dorothea Brooke, with whom George Eliot is especially involved, are subject to her critical judgement. Dinah Morris is perhaps the one character who escapes authorial irony, and consequently seems too good to be true. On the other hand, George Eliot creates no wholly evil, serious character. Although many ordinary people in her novels cause great evil, they do so unintentionally by apparently minor acts of cowardice and thoughtlessness, or self-indulgence. Here the deep seriousness of George Eliot's moral vision is apparent. By her awareness of far-reaching consequences she gives significance to the most inconspicuous lives and the most trivial actions. The mixed, incalculable quality of character is part of her recognition of the rich complexity of life.

Nonetheless, George Eliot's art is more selective and less democratic than some of her theoretical statements would suggest. Despite the concern expressed in such essays as "The Natural History of German Life" for the accurate representation in art of the peasant class, there is, as William J. Hyde points out, 'no peasant in her novels of the rank of Christian Cantle, Haymoss Fry, or Joseph Poorgrass who is given that attention Hardy gives to him.' Furthermore, her protagonists, though usually buried in obscurity, are not drawn from the common ruck of humanity, but comprise the outstanding spirits of their communities. Dinah and Adam are unknown to the wider world.

yet in their moral stature they stand out in the society of Hayslope. Maggie is distinguished by her intellectual and emotional capacity from the 'oppressive narrowness' of St. Oggs. And the wider vision of Dorothea and Lydgate sets them apart amid the provincial pettiness of Middlemarch.

The essentially middle class nature of George Eliot's realism reflects her moral purpose - her desire to establish rapport with the majority of her readers by speaking directly to their situation. Though the central characters rise above the average, the sphere of action and emotion is very much limited to the typical and everyday. It is hardly true to say, as John Holloway does, that, except for Mr. Tulliver and Baldasare, no one in the novels 'feels the sudden, violent passions of anger, or jealousy, or revenge, or spitefulness, or infatuation.' We have only to think of the vengeful anger of Tom Tulliver or Adam Bede, the jealousy that momentarily racks Philip Wakem and Dorothea, the passionate infatuation of Stephen Guest and Maggie. But it is in the main true that she ignores the darker, volcanic side of human nature. She shies away from the deep, dark, elemental passions that occasionally surface in Dickens and Hardy, and which fascinated the Brontës. Consequently her fiction rarely contains violent action or extraordinary and spectacular events.

Throughout her literary career, George Eliot centred her attention on the area of human experience governed by moral considerations.

26 The Victorian Sage, p.122.
As Walter Allen says, 'Her view of life was unswervingly and all the time a moral view, and nothing that existed outside the moral view, that could not be netted by it, existed for her.'\textsuperscript{27} Hence, though many of her novels turn upon sexual relationships, she, unlike Hardy, was interested in the experience of sexual attraction only in so far as it plays characters into moral dilemmas. In The Mill on the Floss the rather cursory treatment makes Maggie's passion for Stephen unconvincing for some readers; but what George Eliot is concerned with is, of course, not the emotion \textit{per se} but the consequent clash of values in Maggie.

The delight in the unusual and preternatural is what gives Hardy's world its distinctive (and at times lurid) colouring, and places it in a quite different order of reality from George Eliot's. By widespread use of fantastic chance, superstition, and the grotesque, Hardy attempts to evoke that which lies beyond rational explanation and empirical proof. "The Lifted Veil" apart, George Eliot limits her plots to the this-worldly, the naturalistic. One of the rare occasions when she evinces the startling preternatural vision which characterizes Hardy is in the passage from \textit{Middlemarch}, quoted above, where she suggests that to have a keen perception 'would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.' Given her usual emphasis on awareness as a value, this passage appears to present a paradox. But the apparent conflict is merely a question of degree. If we were always acutely

conscious we would, in George Eliot's view, be overwhelmed by universal suffering, and lose the power of moral discrimination and action—which is just what seems at times to have happened to Hardy. Therefore, she does not wish to penetrate too deeply below the surface. Like her twentieth-century namesake, Eliot felt that 'human kind cannot bear very much reality.'

George Eliot shared with Hardy a deterministic philosophy of life; but their individual embodiments of a mechanistic universe serve to underline the relevance of John Holloway's salutary reminder that

the outlook of a writer is not the sum of his abstractions, but how he interprets them. The abstractions of George Eliot and Hardy about the general course of things are to some extent similar. But their picture of life is totally different. In one Necessity suggests a bracing drabness; in the other a sometimes dreamlike inconsequentiality.

By playing down mystery and chance, George Eliot's plots work on more obvious and consistent principles of causation than Hardy's. Hers is very much a world of consciousness, of the known, where the interaction of lives in the social milieu is observed with almost scientific precision. Furthermore, while Hardy is primarily concerned with effects (a concern which often resulted in a vague concept of 'fate' or 'destiny' as the determining force), George Eliot's interest centres on causes, especially on the processes by which a character grows to maturity or falls to ruin. Whereas Hardy sees fate as coquettish,

29 The Victorian Sage, p.277.
30 It might be added that while George Eliot's plots are dominantly mimetic, seeking to reproduce the natural sequence of cause and effect, Hardy's tend to be more rhetorical, calculated to induce a sympathetic response to his characters.
George Eliot emphasizes the 'universal regular sequence, without partiality and without caprice.'

It is this 'orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind' that forms the fundamental 'law' on which George Eliot's whole system of morality is based. Having succumbed to the prevailing scepticism of the day and rejected her early evangelical faith, George Eliot, like so many of her contemporaries, underwent a severe moral crisis. She was oppressed by the urgent need to discover motives for moral conduct in the absence of accepted sanctions and traditional beliefs. As those interested in keeping alive the study of the classics never tire of pointing out, there is in the mid-twentieth-century a strikingly contemporary relevance to this quest for values in a world made meaningless by the decay of religious faith. The sanction she sought George Eliot found in 'the inexorable law of consequences,' in that 'invariability of sequence' whereby a man always reaps what he sows:

It is this invariability of sequence which can alone give value to experience and render education in the true sense possible. The divine yea and nay, the seal of prohibition and of sanction, are effectually impressed on human deeds and aspirations, not by means of Greek and Hebrew, but by that inexorable law of consequences, whose evidence is confirmed instead of weakened as the ages advance; and human duty is comprised in the earnest study of this law and patient obedience to its teaching.

Throughout her fiction, George Eliot stresses the need to act responsibly by demonstrating how far-reaching and inexorable are the consequences of even the slightest act. The essential element in the

31 "The Influence of Rationalism," Essays, p. 413.
32 Silas Marner, Ch. ix.
growth to maturity of good-natured egoists like Fred Vincy and Arthur Donnithorne is their recognition of the disastrous effect on others of their easy self-indulgence. It is the index of Godfrey Cass's and Tito Molema's moral immaturity that they trust to favourable chance intervening to avert the 'universal regular sequence' of action and consequence. The careers of Godfrey, Tito, and, in Middlemarch, of Nicholas Bulstrode (to cite but three examples) powerfully enforce the view that, no matter how long the delay or unexpected the shape, nemesis is finally inescapable.

This concept of undeviating natural law enjoining to duty must not be confused with a crudely unrealistic doctrine of poetic justice. George Eliot repudiated the latter as incompatible with her desire to show things as they are not as they ought to be. In her view, the unreality of poetic justice not only impeded the moral end of fiction, but could be positively baneful in its effect by appealing to human vindictiveness: 'The emotion of satisfaction which a reader feels when the villain of the book dies of some hideous disease, or is crushed by a railway train, is no more essentially moral than the satisfaction which used to be felt in whipping culprits at the cart-tail.' Nevertheless, George Eliot herself can be seen to employ a one-sided form of poetic justice: in a grievously imperfect world good is rarely rewarded, but evil is always punished. Despite all her emphasis on realism and fidelity to life, there is, most readers would agree, unreality here. While unwilling to idealize life to support her moral

thesis, George Eliot does, for the sake of that same thesis, conveniently ignore the evil man who flourishes like the green bay tree. Sometimes this outlook leads to quite arbitrary plotting - as with the death of Tito, or the childlessness of Godfrey Cass's marriage. But in her best novels, George Eliot's grasp of character and social dynamics is so masterful that she convinces us of the necessity of the nemesis; or at least, as with Bulstrode, we are so fascinated by the process that we accept the gratuitous chance by which it is triggered off.

The difference between George Eliot and Hardy in their representation of determinist law is apparent also in their attitudes towards it. Hardy acknowledges that a mistake in the past betrays a man into the hands of fate, but strongly feels that this should not be so, that man should be made free from the past. For George Eliot, the fact that we cannot escape the past is what makes for virtue in the present - if only for the sake of the future. The difference is emblematic of a wider divergence. In his later fiction, especially Tess, Hardy becomes incorrigibly romantic, bitterly rebelling against the order of things that has produced so much mortal pain. George Eliot shares a sense of the incompatibility of the natural order with human aspirations, but believes meaning and morality depend upon recognition and stoical acceptance of harsh reality: 'The highest "calling and election" is to do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance.' And 'the test of a higher religion might be, that it should enable the believer to do without the consola-

35 Cf. Hyde: 'Standing behind her plot structure and imposing itself upon her realistic characters is a moral theory of action which George Eliot could not safely entrust to the mere objective reporting of life' (Op. cit., 162-3).
36 Letters, III, 366.
tions which his egotism would demand. In her view, the very indifference of nature to man's wishes motivates to moral action by emphasizing individual insignificance and the consequent need for human solidarity:

For if it be true that Nature at certain moments seems charged with a presentiment of one individual lot, must it not also be true that she seems unmindful, unconscious of another? For there is no hour that has not its births of gladness and despair, no morning brightness that does not bring new sickness to desolation as well as new forces to genius and love. There are so many of us, and our lots are so different: what wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of - to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more.

For George Eliot, then, the conditions of life make the call to selfless resignation imperative. The needs of others must serve as the guide and motive of action. Through art she sought to create 'that vision of others' needs, which is the source of justice, tenderness, sympathy in the fullest sense.' That is a highly significant sentence in the expression of George Eliot's outlook. The needs of others provide the only possible objective sanction for morality, but it is dependent upon sympathetic feeling as the subjective motivation.

37 Letters, V, 69. Cf. her stern stress on the unrecompensing nature of duty: 'The notion that duty looks stern, but all the while has her hand full of sugar-plums, with which she will reward us by-and-by, is the favourite cant of optimists, who try to make out that this tangled wilderness of life has a plan as easy to trace as that of a Dutch garden; but it really undermines all true moral development by perpetually substituting something extrinsic as a motive to action, instead of the immediate impulse of love or justice, which alone makes an action truly moral' (Essays, p.135).

38 Adam Bede, Ch. xxvii.

39 Letters, VI, 98.
for action. Such is George Eliot's optimistic view of human nature that she believes a person need only have his eyes opened to the situation of his fellows for the moral emotions to flow. Hence, in her world, someone like Rosamond Vincy or Hetty Sorrel who fails to be moved by the plight of others appears less than human. After her denial of a transcendent God and human immortality, this is the central belief to which George Eliot clung with unshakeable, almost desperate, faith:

My books are ... deliberately, carefully constructed on a basis which even in my doubting mind is never shaken by a doubt. ... The basis I mean is my conviction as to the relative goodness and nobleness of human dispositions and motives.

This morality motivated by concern for others springs from a strong sense of human interdependence. No man is an island, to be considered entire of himself; each individual inevitably affects and is affected by the lives of his fellows. The densely-realized social landscapes of her novels are an attempt to embody this vision of human interconnectedness. Society is seen as an organic whole, like 'the human body, with all its various parts depending on one another, and with a terrible liability to get wrong because of that delicate dependence. This is what gives the law of consequences its moral force.

40 It is true that, in a negative way, recognition of the law of Nemesis will lead to moral action, but it depends upon feeling for its ultimate sanction: 'that awe of the Divine Nemesis ... was felt by religious pagans, and, though it took a more positive form under Christianity, is still felt by the mass of mankind simply as a vague fear at anything which is called wrong-doing. Such terror of the unseen is so far above mere sensual cowardice that it will annihilate that cowardice: it is the initial recognition of a moral law restraining desire, and checks the hard bold scrutiny of imperfect thought into obligations which can never be proved to have any sanctity in the absence of feeling' (Romola, Ch. xi).

41 Letters, IV, 472.

The effects of our own misdeeds are never limited to ourselves, but spread incalculably through the social body like a contagious disease. Furthermore, the process is irreversible. Once committed a deed is irrevocable; as Fred Vincy and Arthur Donnithorne must realize, no amount of repentance will undo or compensate for its effects. Even the Christian doctrine of forgiveness can be pernicious in obscuring a great impetus to right action, the fact that everything done is done irrevocably, that even the omnipotence of God cannot uncommit a deed, cannot make that undone which has been done; that every act of his must bear its allotted fruit according to the everlasting laws. 43

The unpitying nature of this law is indicative of the severity of George Eliot's moral outlook. The seriousness with which she approached her art was but part of the total seriousness with which she viewed life. Her set of values naturally places great weight on human responsibility. Thus, despite her deterministic world view, George Eliot sees man as possessing a significant degree of free will. 44

This is not, strictly speaking, philosophically consistent, but George Eliot is primarily concerned with truth to personal experience and with the need to discover motivation to moral action. Therefore she could write to Mrs. Ponsonby,


44 George Levine in his article, "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot," PMLA, LXXVII (June 1962), 269-79, goes a great way to resolving this apparent antinomy by emphasizing the distinction between causation and compulsion, and also the important sense in which the individual determines his own character.
every fresh morning is an opportunity that one can look forward to for exerting one's will. I shall not be satisfied with your philosophy till you have conciliated necessitarianism - I hate the ugly word - with the practice of willing strongly, willing to will strongly, and so on, that being what you certainly can do and have done about a great many things in life, whence it is clear that there is nothing in truth to hinder you from it - except you will say the absence of a motive. But that absence I don't believe in, in your case - only in the case of empty barren souls. 45

When we approach the novels we find that the area of human free will, though strictly limited, is not negligible. Man is inevitably restricted by circumstances, for 'there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.' 46 So Mr. Tulliver finds when he seeks someone to grant him a loan:

'It must be no client of Wakem's,' he said to himself; and yet at the end of a fortnight it turned out to the contrary; not because Mr. Tulliver's will was feeble, but because external fact was stronger. 47

The character of Lydgate in Middlemarch is a poignant study of the way in which social pressures can destroy noble aspiration. But George Eliot stresses, too, the part Lydgate himself plays in his own defeat by his failure to apply that 'distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour' (158) to areas of life outside medicine especially to his relations with women. 'It always remains true,' the author concludes, 'that if we had been greater, circumstance would have been less strong against us' (627).

As we have seen, the notion of universal causality was fundamental

45 Letters, VI, 166.
46 Middlemarch, Finale, p.896.
47 The Mill on the Floss, Bk.I, Ch. xiii, p.120.
to George Eliot's moral system. The very multiplicity of causes (many of them balancing and counteracting each other) at work in her world, however, create a considerable sense of freedom. The variety of forces acting upon a character suggest a variety of possible courses open to him. This sense of openness is especially emphasized in the portraits of young people setting out on the road of life. The author sees clearly the character's vulnerable points which, with particular sets of circumstances, may conspire to bring him to ruin. Yet the outcome is seen to hinge on just what circumstances do arise (it may be that life will never put the young person's mettle to the test, though the narrator's commentary raises the opposite expectation), and on how far his character develops towards eradicating the weaknesses. In weighing up the character of Arthur Donnithorne, the narrator comments,

The chances are that he will go through life without scandalising any one; a seaworthy vessel that no one would refuse to insure. Ships, certainly, are liable to casualties, which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction that would never have been discoverable in smooth water; and many a 'good fellow,' through a disastrous combination of circumstances, has undergone a like betrayal.

But we have no fair ground for entertaining unfavourable auguries concerning Arthur Donnithorne ... 48

When badly handled this device appears facile, and serves only to exhibit an irritating coyness on the part of the omniscient narrator, who obviously knows the future that she withholds: 'Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and

48 Adam Bede, Ch. xii.
rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home. At its best the device arouses tremendous suspense and draws the reader into sympathetic involvement with the character's career. As the narrator outlines the prospects of Lydgate's future, we are absorbed by the rich variety of possibilities, intrigued by the delicate balance in human destiny:

He was at a starting-point which makes many a man's career a fine subject for betting, if there were any gentlemen given to that amusement who could appreciate the complicated probabilities of an arduous purpose, with all the possible thwartings and furtherings of circumstance, all the niceties of inward balance, by which a man swims and makes his point or else is carried headlong. The risk would remain, even with close knowledge of Lydgate's character; for character too is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making, as much as the Middlemarch doctor and immortal discoverer, and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding.

The main reason why this comment is more acceptable than the two previous passages is that the narrator is here summing up how Lydgate would appear at a particular point in time to a human observer, and is not inconsistently suggesting that she is as much in the dark about the future as the reader.

The relative openness of George Eliot's picture sets it apart from Hardy's, where life appears oppressively deterministic because everything is traced to a single cause and seen to tend inevitably to one end. Tess's ruin is shown to follow in invincible causal sequence from Parson Tringham's careless disclosure. In George Eliot, the issues are felt to be delicately balanced right to the end: will

49 The Mill on the Floss, Bk. VI, Ch. vi, p.378.
50 Middlemarch, Ch. XV, pp. 156-7.
Lydgate succeed or fail; will Maggie succumb to her passion for Stephen or renounce him? But in Hardy tragic destiny announces its coming far in advance and approaches with crushing inexorability. Brief interludes of happiness (like the Talbothays episode in *Tess*) do not open new possibilities; they are but brief and doomed hiatuses in the flow of tragedy. Still, the air of freedom in George Eliot must not be over-emphasized. The author's comments and the depiction of the environment discourage great hopes of fulfilment for gifted characters like Maggie and Dorothea.  

With an area of freedom in which to manoeuvre, George Eliot's characters are held responsible for their own destinies. However untoward they may be, circumstances are not the ultimate determinant. Whereas Hardy blames fate, the defective make-up of the world, for man's plight, George Eliot sees unhappiness as more often the result of man's blind egoism. She makes imperative the call of duty to a life of self-sacrificing altruism and of resignation to individual unimportance in an indifferent universe. Hardy holds similar values, but there is enormous difference in emphasis between the two. Eliot's more optimistic view of possibilities results in the conviction that man can to some extent (and therefore should) act to improve the human lot. For Hardy, exhortations to moral rectitude are gratuitous, because man has so little control over the course of things. He is much more reluctant to judge his characters because

51 The case of Dorothea is, of course, exceptional because the Prelude to *Middlemarch* so strongly colours our expectations.
human misdeeds appear to him of little moment in the context of the overwhelming injustice of the natural order. To borrow Albert J. Guerard's succinct distinction, Hardy was primarily concerned that people be happy, whereas George Eliot, like Conrad, wanted them to be good.\footnote{See Thomas Hardy, p.158. This is, of course, a simplistic view. George Eliot after all wanted people to be good primarily so that others may be made happier.} This gives her a much surer basis for judgement.

Hardy is placed in a dilemma when the happiness of two sympathetic characters (for example Thos a sin and Eustacia) conflict. George Eliot does not have this problem since she stresses the necessity of selfless renunciation. Problems of judgement do arise in her works, however, when a character is forced to choose between opposing demands.

In The Mill on the Floss, Maggie is torn by the rival claims of Stephen on the one hand and of Lucy and Philip on the other. Many modern readers have expressed dissatisfaction with the author's resolution of this conflict.

Though for George Eliot, as for Hardy, heroic action is impossible, the little that can be done is to her worth striving for:

One must care for small immediate results as well as for great and distant ones - and in my mind nothing takes greater emphasis than the possibility of being certain that our character and deeds make a few lives near to us better than they would have been without our presence in the world. Scepticism has less chance of creeping in here than in relation to larger results.\footnote{Letters, V, 76.}

The scepticism and fatalism apparent in Hardy were just the attitudes George Eliot strove so hard to save her contemporaries from falling into following their rejection of traditional religious beliefs.
Thus she wrote to Mrs. Charles Bray:

I cannot quite agree that it is hard to see what has been the good of your life. It seems to me very clear that you have been a good of a kind that would have been sorely missed by those who have been nearest to you and also by some who are more distant. And it is this kind of good which must reconcile us to life - not any answer to the question, 'What would the universe have been without me?'

*Middlemarch*, her finest novel and most mature representation of life, ends on this note of muted optimism in generalizing the significance of Dorothea's life:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (896)

'Life,' George Eliot wrote, 'though a good to men on the whole, is a doubtful good to many, and to some not a good at all.' Hardy, at best, would have written, 'Life is a doubtful good to men on the whole, and to too many not a good at all.'

Late in her novelistic career George Eliot asserted that 'there has been no change in the point of view from which I regard our life since I wrote my first fiction - the "Scenes of Clerical Life".' It is true that her view of life is remarkably consistent throughout the novels; she began writing with a mature and deeply considered

54 Letters, VI, 319.
55 Letters, IV, 183.
56 Letters, VI, 318.
outlook that underwent little revision or development during her
career. For this reason, it is perhaps easier (and safer) to gener-
alize about the pattern of judgement in her novels than it is with
Hardy, who moves to an increasingly romantic view of human aspiration
and rebellion. Nevertheless, the general features of her vision
that have been outlined do not all appear in the same proportions
and with equal emphases in each work, and the success with which
she embodied that vision varied considerably from novel to novel.
It is important, therefore, to experience and consider each novel
in its own terms, as well as in relation to the rest of George Eliot's
fictional and non-fictional writing, in order to appreciate her spec-
ific achievements and shortcomings, strengths and weaknesses.
6. **THE MILL ON THE FLOSS**

Among George Eliot's novels *The Mill on the Floss* stands alone. The book has an emotional intensity not to be found anywhere else in her work. It soon becomes obvious to the reader that here the author's involvement in the fictional world is of a singularly personal nature. As Laurence Lerner points out,

> It is not an autobiographical novel in its events: Maggie's story is nothing like Marian Evans's. But in a more important sense it is deeply autobiographical: Maggie's struggles are her author's transposed into fiction. Marian too had a brother whom she loved intensely as a child, who grew up conventional and self-righteous, and whom she quarrelled and broke with. She too went through a phase of violent asceticism and was constantly tempted by self-denial. She had the same passionate nature, the same need to be loved, the same instability, the same sublimated egoism, the same devoted loyalty.¹

From this deeply personal investment in the novel spring the book's greatest strengths and major weaknesses. The strength lies in the force and vividness with which experience is recreated, in the immediacy and vitality of the novelist's world. Successive generations of readers bear witness to the power of the first half of the book; it is one of the finest recreations of the child's view of...

¹ George Eliot and Her Readers, ed. Laurence Lerner and John Holmstrom (London, 1966), p. 45. See Barbara Hardy's essay in her anthology, *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (London, 1970), pp. 42-58, for a valuable analysis of the (often indirect) ways in which autobiographical elements shape the novel. 'There is some relation,' she asserts, 'at each stage in the novel, between a great personal need and the artistic shaping' (p. 50). I have concentrated more on the way personal pressures affect the distance between narrator and character, than on the book's relation to specific episodes in George Eliot's life.
life in English fiction, and without equal in the nineteenth cen-
tury. But the author not only excels in her phenomenological
grasp of experience, she also demonstrates a sure understanding of
it and an ability to place the characters' view in a broader per-
spective. As Maggie grows older, the intellectual distance between
author and character naturally narrows - a fact reflected in their
increasingly similar vocabularies. And, as most critics have felt,
there is also a corresponding narrowing of critical distance, so
that towards the end their two points of view seem indistinguish-
able. George Eliot appears to fully endorse Maggie's subjective
evaluation of the tangled situation she plays herself into, and to
accept her way out as the only moral course available. While it
gives great sensuous and emotive force to the novel, the author's
personal involvement also leads to a weakening of judgement, a
blurring of critical perspective.

This blurring of perspective resulting from over-identification
with Maggie manifests itself in various ways. It is evident
in a tendency to sentimentalize the past; in the idealization of
renunciation as a good in itself; in the idealization of Stephen
Guest; and above all in the specious resolution involving both a
wish-fulfilment reconciliation between Maggie and brother Tom and

2 Cf. Leslie Stephen on The Mill on the Floss: 'The first part of
that novel appears to me to mark the culmination of her genius. So
far, it is one of the rare books which it is difficult to praise in
adequate language' ("George Eliot," Cornhill [February 1884], in A
pp. 143-4).
a falsification of George Eliot's vision of life in the reunion of Stephen and Lucy Deane. These flaws result from the author's failure to establish or maintain an external standard by which to judge her heroine. Towards the end the novel becomes increasingly subjectivist; Maggie comes to define herself the standards by which she is to be judged - with less and less qualification by the omniscient narrator.

II

Possessed as it is of such a strongly autobiographical strain, *The Mill on the Floss* is naturally very much preoccupied with the sense of time, especially of time past. It is an attempt to discover permanency and value within change, to recreate the past so vividly that its reality will be felt in the present. As a progressive, temporal art form the novel is particularly well suited to conveying a sense of time passing. The pitifully slow accretion of the Tulliver's savings to pay off their debts, or the dull monotony day following day in expectant sameness in Maggie's deprived existence are made painfully real in the reader's experience. The experience of time's passage is vital to the novel's central theme: resignation versus desire. For George Eliot, resignation is essential to moral maturity, and it is a lesson that can only be learnt over a long period. As Maggie learns through bitter disillusionment, the moral life is a continual battle, not a victory
won in a day. The more embittered Philip doubts that "life is long enough to learn that lesson" (308). Unhappily, it is one of the weaknesses of the novel's ending that George Eliot fails to convince us Maggie has succeeded in learning that lesson either.

But if the novel successfully conveys the sense of people living through time, to establish the lasting value of what passes is a more difficult task. Adam Bede affirms the timeless values rooted in the endlessly-repeated seasonal pattern and the close-knit community of pastoral life. The Mill on the Floss, too, seeks to establish communal values that will transcend time, but fails because no such community as that of the Poyseres and the Bedes is to be found in St. Oggs.

Despite her rejection of traditional Christianity and subsequent translation of Strauss and Feuerbach, her defiance of conventional morality in living with the undivorced Lewes, and her reviewing and editorial work on the liberal Westminster Review, George Eliot was by nature deeply conservative. As Basil Willey has pointed out, the lifelong 'conservative-reforming' tension in George Eliot was very much a conflict between 'the heart and the head.' The superb balance and sanity of outlook that gives George Eliot's best works great moral authority depended upon a reconciliation of this conflict. Paradoxically, balance was achieved by subjecting one element of the conflict to the other, by subordinating intellect to feeling:

The first impulse of a young and ingenuous mind is to withhold the slightest sanction from all that contains even a mixture of supposed error. ... But a year or two of reflection and the experience of our own miserable weakness, which will ill afford to part even with the crutch of superstition, must, I think, effect a change. Speculative truth begins to appear but a shadow of individual minds, agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the truth of feeling as the only universal bond of union.4

The predominance of the conservative instinct is especially marked in The Mill on the Floss. The book is thoroughly pervaded by a deep reverence for the past that amounts to a natural piety. It is dominated by the view that personal identity and morality are rooted in the past. In George Eliot's conception, character is a process, and 'Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds.'5 Therefore a man is the evolved product of all his previous actions; we are what our past has made us. Faithfulness to the past is the principle upon which Maggie bases her crucial moral decision: '"If the past is not to bind us,"' she pleads with Stephen, '"where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment"' (448). Continuity of life is seen as absolutely essential to emotional and spiritual wholeness. For Maggie, the most appalling prospect arising from her father's bankruptcy and the sale of the family's possessions is that '"the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning"' (223).6

4 Letters, I, 162.
5 Adam Bede, Ch. xxxix.
6 This theme recurs in Middlemarch in the relationship of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy. They both feel that because their love is so deep-rooted in the past it has become part of their individual identity. As Fred puts it, to give up Mary '"would be like beginning to live on wooden legs"' (550).
Continuity involves not just a strong loyalty to the past, but also a sense of attachment to a particular place, a familiar locality in which one's being has its roots. As in Hardy, man is seen as an organic part of the natural world, and the healthy life is one well-rooted in its environment. (In *Adam Bede* the index of Hetty Sorrel's emotional crippledom is that she feels no affection for the people and objects among whom she has been brought up). A recurrent theme in George Eliot's early fiction is the personally disastrous effect of being deracinated. Silas Warner's ejection from his native community alienates him from himself and other people. For the Poyters, the need to leave the farm that has been passed down from father to son is equivalent to a death sentence: "we should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and never thrive again." Similarly, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Mr. Tulliver, after he has been sold up, is constrained to stay on at the mill as tenant to the hated Wakem by his inseparability from the 'old home' that is part of his life, part of himself. He couldn't bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this, where he knew the sound of every gate and door, and felt that the shape and colour of every roof and weather-stain and broken hillock was good, because his growing senses had been fed on them. Our instructed vagrancy, which has hardly time to linger by the hedgerows, but runs away early to the tropics, and is at home with palms and banyans - which is nourished on books of travel, and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi - can hardly get a dim notion of what an old-fashioned man like Tulliver felt for this spot, where all his memories centred, and where life seemed like a familiar smooth-handled tool that the fingers clutch with loving ease. (245)

7 *Adam Bede*, Ch. xxxii.
What gives old objects and places their value, then, is simply their familiarity, the fact that long association has intertwined our affections inextricably round them. Since affectionate feeling is the only possible moral guide in the baffling world of vanished absolutes, what the affections attach themselves to is necessarily good. While old objects and associations are hallowed by our feeling for them, these familiar things become in turn a well-spring of future feeling, a source of moral sustenance and stability. The idea is closely akin to Wordsworth's, 'So feeling comes in aid / Of feeling and diversity of strength / Attends us, if but once we have been strong.'8

The dangers of such a view of the past are obvious. It can lead to a quite uncritical outlook whereby unworthy objects are reverenced because of their long-association. If things are good simply because they are familiar and loved, then the powers of discrimination are paralyzed. Maggie feels strongly the wrongness of her father's hatred of Wakem, yet out of filial love she submits to his unjust feeling in agreeing to renounce Wakem's son Philip. And George Eliot, as we shall see, supports Maggie's judgement. The uncritical estimate of the past in passages like this reflects the subjectivism embodied in the author's attitude towards Maggie:

There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality: we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own

8 The Prelude, XII, 11. 269-71.
limbs ... is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute ...? But Heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining those old inferior things - if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. One's delight in an elderberry bush overhanging the confused leafage of a hedgerow bank, as a more gladdening sight than the finest cistus or fuchsia spreading itself on the softest undulating turf, is an entirely unjustifiable preference to a landscape-gardener, or to any of those severely regulated minds who are free from the weakness of any attachment that does not rest on a demonstrable superiority of qualities. And there is no better reason for preferring this elderberry bush than that it stirs an early memory - that it is no novelty in my life, speaking to me merely through my present sensibilities to form and colour, but the long companion of my existence, that wove itself into my joys when joys were vivid. (141)

The inflated phrase, 'the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute,' is obviously tongue-in-cheek as is the use of 'weakness' in relation to the 'severely regulated minds' - in George Eliot's view such sentimental weakness is strength, the lack of it serious deficiency. The strength of the conservative bias apparent here is typical of the novel as a whole, and necessarily raises doubts about the book's balance. In Middlemarch the projection of value outwards on to the world is seen to be the result of blind egoism and leads to disastrous results, like Dorothea's unhappy marriage to Casaubon. Yet this passage presents projection as the way in which the past attains its value; objective standards based on 'the demonstrable superiority of qualities' are

9 Middlemarch, it seems to me, exhibits a surer critical balance in judging objects of affection upon their merits. Dorothea right­fully refuses to be bound by Casaubon's wishes after his death; no amount of wife­ly loyalty, in George Eliot's view, justifies the waste of her life in a profitless task.
rejected in favour of a subjective estimate. Moreover, the origins of the process in childhood when 'the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality' unconsciously implies an inherent immaturity in such an attitude.

The assertion of the past's authority is not just a moral emphasis in The Mill on the Floss. Commitment to the past springs, too, from the artist's desire to burrow back to the sources of inspiration. Just as the novel derives its extraordinary immediacy from the recreation of a particular place and time, so the author's imagination must have its roots deep in a specific locality:

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet - what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows - such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us, and transform our perception into love. (36)

But George Eliot is doing more than investigating the well-springs of the artistic imagination. Her personal investment in the past is much broader than that. She is deeply involved in the retrospective narrative, in the life and situation of the main character. The unusual first chapter sets the book's tone and dramatizes the author's attitude towards the past.
The chapter is a reverie of an 'afternoon many years ago,' but the reader is not made aware it is a dream till the chapter's end; the scene is presented as though happening before our eyes. As in the opening of Bleak House, the present tense produces a paradoxical sense of immediacy and detachment. The chapter opens in the habitual present, which conveys the timeless sweep of the countryside, but soon moves to a specific time and place. From the indefiniteness of the first sentence - which, with its lack of a main verb, reads like the stage direction of a play - the narrator passes through more precise references to the season and month to her present situation on the banks of the Floss. The present of action and narration are now identical as she pauses in her wanderings to gaze at Dorloote Mill.

But for all her closeness to the scene, the narrator remains outside it looking on. She is apparently a stranger returning to once familiar scenes. Omniscience denied, the narrator becomes a human observer, herself within the fictional frame, yet not of it. As we learn at the end of the chapter, the clock has been turned back many years; yet the narrator, in her personal span, has been unable to reverse time's relentless march - even in a dream.

10 The description of the countryside around St. Ogg's is echoed in the beginning of the final chapter. The dominant features of the autumnal scene, the 'golden' corn-stacks and the hedgerows, are reiterated. The emphasis (not unlike Hardy's) is on the cyclic pattern of nature continuing in its eternal rhythm indifferent to individual fatalities.
The dream cannot be fully entered into. She is divided from the scene by the passage of time; it is a place where she dwells only in memory: 'I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge.' And memory too is fleeting, the length of the sojourn in the past strictly limited. Throughout the chapter there is a strong emphasis on the passing away of time: 'I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon'; the waggoner returns 'at this late hour'; the little girl has been standing on the same spot 'ever since I paused on the bridge'; it is 'time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge ...' The chapter, then, demonstrates a poignant nostalgia, a strong yearning after the vanished past, a fleeting revelling in memory which cannot be sustained. At the end comes the wakening into present reality that has all the numbing, chilling quality of literal physical sensation. As a narrative strategy, a way of introducing the story, the chapter may seem contrived and artificial; but with great immediacy and economy it captures the author's emotional relation to her world, even though it plays havoc with the technical consistency of her relation to her materials.

11 Even before the narrator 'awakes' there is a hint that this is but a dream, a suggestion of the real world impinging upon the consciousness: 'The rush of the water, and the booming of the mill, bring a dreamy deafness which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond.'
Throughout the chapter the narrator's strong attachment to this particular scene is apparent. The text abounds with terms of endearment and personal feeling. 'How lovely the little river is, with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving.' The scene is 'pleasant to look at,' full of 'charm,' making the narrator 'in love with moistness.' The tone of sympathetic, almost sentimental, identification extends to all the scene, including even the waggoner's horses:

the strong, submissive, meek-eyed beasts, who, I fancy, are looking mild reproach at him from between their blinkers, that he should crack his whip at them in that awful manner, as if they needed that hint! ... Look at their grand shaggy feet that seem to grasp the firm earth, at the patient strength of their necks bowed under the heavy collar, at the mighty muscles of their struggling haunches!

The scene is obviously one with which the narrator is quite familiar; what she cannot see she imagines from past experience: 'I should like well to hear them neigh over their hardly-earned feed of corn, and see them, with their moist necks freed from the harness, dipping their eager nostrils into the muddy pond.' The personal tone deepens to one of solicitude: 'It is time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very bright fire to tempt her.' All in all, the feeling is irresistible that the author is returning to her own childhood, to the picture of the 'little playfellow' that is her early self. (Note how child and adult are paralleled in their like motionless absorption in the action of the mill.
The book is obviously going to be charged with strong feelings of personal identification with the characters, and of nostalgia for a past recoverable only in the imagination. The dangers that attend these qualities—loss of critical perspective and sentimentality—scarcely need to be mentioned.

Since morality and identity are, in George Eliot's view, rooted in the past, memory is a vital moral sense. It is emphasized that 'Memory was excluded' (437) when Maggie temporarily succumbed to 'The Great Temptation.' And she finds the strength to resist her final temptation only with the return of 'the memories that no passion could long quench: the long past came back to her, and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve' (485). But memory is a notoriously deceptive faculty; it is so easy to falsify the past, especially when the present is harsh and the future bleak. The universally praised presentation of Maggie and Tom's childhood is remarkable for its accuracy and understanding of the child's outlook. George Eliot's superiority to most of Dickens' portrayals of childhood is due largely to her lack of condescension; whereas Dickens' children so often appear as tiny adults, George Eliot, like twentieth-century novelist Richard Hughes in *High Wind in Jamaica*, sees

It is significant that Maggie's attachment to the locale of her upbringing was paralleled by George Eliot's sense of deracination from a similar locale in actual life. As Gordon S. Haight, her most authoritative biographer, remarks, 'Throughout thirty years in London her yearning for blue sky, orchards full of old trees and rough grass, hedgerow paths among endless fields, haunted her always' (George Eliot: A Biography [London, 1968], p. 3).
childhood as an essentially different order of experience that must be rendered in its own terms. (Hardy, it has been noted with much attendant speculation, hardly ever gave any attention to the child in his fiction).

Only when she moves away from the close rendering of day-to-day experience to take a more distant view, does George Eliot tend to sentimentalize childhood. As Maggie and Tom leave Stellings for home, where their father lies bankrupt and dangerously ill, the indistinctness of the scene is indicative of a nostalgic haze settling over the past:

The two slight youthful figures soon grew indistinct on the distant road - were soon lost behind the projecting hedgerow.

They had gone forth together into their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them. (178)

The Miltonic echo of Adam and Eve leaving Eden is, of course, a rhetorical play to heighten the climax, to emphasize the blighting effect their father's sudden financial disaster will have on their lives. But such rhetoric distorts the view of Maggie's early life which has been far from paradisical.

The central tragic fact of Maggie's existence is the incongruity of her nature and her environment, an incongruity apparent from the beginning when she is ironically introduced by the narrator as 'this small mistake of nature' (9),13 and her father fears that

13 The irony here is primarily directed at the adults who see Maggie as a mistake of nature; but this only heightens the sense of the incongruity of her nature and environment.
the 'little un' is 'too cute for a woman' (8). The consequent inner and outer conflict attends Maggie throughout her life; the troubles of her adolescence and adulthood are essentially continuous with those of her childhood.

The distant sentimental view of childhood appears again at the novel's end:

The boat reappeared - but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (491)

The style itself (especially the sentimental diminutive in 'clasped their little hands in love,' and the romantic haziness of 'roamed the daisied fields') betrays the softness of George Eliot's vision at this point. The passage is false not because Maggie and Tom never knew times of happiness and love, but because, purporting as it does to be representative, this distorts the general character of their childhood relationship (as shown in the earlier part of the book), which was much more marked by bitter strife than by loving union.

If the various episodes of Maggie's childhood are considered individually, a repeated pattern emerges of initial hope or joy quashed each time by later developments. During Mr. Riley's visit, her triumph in her father's praise of her extraordinary ability ends in disgrace over the dubious nature of her reading. Her joyful expectation of Tom's home-coming is doused by the memory that his rabbits have died through her neglect; his longed-for arrival is,
therefore, spoiled by his anger when he hears the news and deserts Maggie for the day. The wonderfully true-to-life jam puff incident results in Maggie being left in misery while Tom goes off with Bob Jakin, a common occurrence, for 'every holiday-time Maggie was sure to have days of grief because he had gone off with Bob' (42). On the visit to Garum Firs, Maggie's sudden rapture at the sound of Uncle Pullet's musical snuff-box leads to further alienation of Tom and general disparagement of her unruly behaviour. Her expectations of being honoured by the gypsies to whom she has fled soon fade, and she begins to feel fear for her life. The fishing expedition is 'one of their happy mornings,' clearly a rare episode in Maggie's painful childhood: when Tom rushes up to inform her that she has caught a fish she is 'frightened lest she had been doing something wrong, as usual' (34-35; my italics). 14

For the most part, then, Maggie's childhood is characterized by an oppressive sense of blame, a constant need for Tom's love (what use was anything, if Tom didn't love her? [31]), and repeated estrangement from him. 15 Her childhood is very much more a

14 The closeness of the book to George Eliot's own childhood is indicated by the appearance of an almost identical incident in the "Brother and Sister" poems (1869), nos. VII and VIII. This whole sequence reveals a much grosser sentimentalization of the past than anything in the novel, and indicates how enormously important the childhood relationship with her brother was to George Eliot.

15 Cf. John Hagan, "A Reinterpretation of The Mill on the Floss," PMLA, LXXXVII (Jan.1972), 53-63, who sees the parallel episodes in which the relationship of brother and sister is defined in Bk.I as always culminating in reconciliation and the satisfaction of Maggie's need to be loved (p. 58). Such a view seems to me to misread the evidence of the text.
'thorny wilderness' than a golden time. She therefore retreats into a private fantasy world where she refashions everything after her own desires, for 'Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium' (42). Here the author reveals the understanding and critical perspective which for the most part distinguish her portrayal of Maggie's early life.

The omniscient point of view is essential to this balanced perspective in the first part of the novel. The omniscient narrator is able to see childhood experience in its own terms as well as through the adult's eyes, and also to step back and see why the adult fails in sympathy towards it:

Very trivial, perhaps, this anguish seems to weather-worn mortals who have to think of Christmas bills, dead loves and broken friendships; but it was not less bitter to Maggie - perhaps it was even more bitter - than what we are fond of calling antithetically the real troubles of mature life.... Is there anyone who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him, of what he liked and disliked when he was in frock and trousers, but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then - when it was so long from one Midsummer to another? ...Surely if we could recall that early bitterness, and the dim guesses, the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gave the bitterness its intensity, we should not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children. (58-9)

The narrator, taking both past and future into her purview, gives perspective on this strangely perspectiveless outlook of the child who cannot see far before or after. To live only in the present is a mark of immaturity, and the townspeople of St. Oggs are judged by the juxtaposition of the narrator's retrospective vision (which sees the town as so steeped in history that it appears
'a continuation and outgrowth of nature' [106]) with their blinkered view: 'The mind of St. Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walked the streets' (108). But the child is by nature bound to the present: 'Childhood has no forebodings; but then, it is soothed by no memories of outlived sorrow' (77). This, as the narrator with 'intimate penetration' observes, is what makes the child's or adolescent's grief so painful:

There is no hopelessness so sad as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of others; though we who look on think lightly of such premature despair, as if our vision of the future lightened the blind sufferer's present. (219)

Much of the poignance of the early books results from the encapsulating of the children's belief in a timeless world within the narrator's wider consciousness of impending change:

They trotted along and sat down together, with no thought that life would ever change much for them; they would only get bigger and not go to school, and it would always be like the holidays; they would always live together and be fond of each other. (35)

III

As the narrative moves beyond the world of childhood, the focus of attention is less evenly balanced between brother and sister, coming to centre increasingly on Maggie alone till she dominates the book. Sister Maggie was one of the many possible titles George Eliot considered before accepting Blackwood's suggestion, and it
certainly would not have been inappropriate. One of the book's earliest reviewers, writing just three days after its publication, commented:

We do not remember any novel where the interest so clearly centres round the one character, where every fact - the smallest - is read with deep attention, because it may affect her - as in real life the very name of a town or street, or even shop, remembered in connexion with some one person much beloved, has at once a new vivid life. 16

Like all George Eliot's (and Hardy's) gifted characters, Maggie is frustrated by the cramping circumstances of her life. As a little girl she is seen to be 'full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied, beseeching affection' (165). As she grows up the clash between her needs and her situation becomes increasingly intense:

Maggie ... was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life, and give her soul a sense of home in it. (219).

Maggie's life becomes a quest for fulfilment and meaning, an attempt to find a principle by which she can live and resolve her inner conflict:

She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life: the unhappy-looking father, seated at the breakfast-table; the childish, bewildered mother; the little sordid tasks that filled the hours, or the more oppressive emptiness of weary, joyless leisure; the need of some tender demonstrative love ...the privation of all pleasant things that had come to her.

more than to others: she wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. (267)

Through the particular career of Maggie, then, the novel examines the general questions of how one should live, by what standards, to what ends. Much of the strength and sense of contemporary relevance of The Mill on the Floss lies in the subtlety and maturity with which these universal issues are probed; and its major failing is the way in which they are dropped at the end, and an unreal fantasy conclusion adopted.

All recent criticism of George Eliot is greatly indebted to and must come to terms with the provocative and trenchant critique of F.R. Leavis in The Great Tradition. While much of his discussion of The Mill on the Floss carries great weight, it does in parts exhibit a characteristic tendency to sacrifice accuracy to pungency. At the centre of his criticism of the novel is the view that George Eliot's portrait of Maggie is throughout a case of un-critical and immature self-idealization:

the soulful side of Maggie, her hunger for ideal exaltations.... is offered by George Eliot herself - and this of course is the main point - with a remarkable absence of criticism. There is, somewhere, a discordance, a discrepancy, a failure to reduce things to a due relevance: it is a characteristic and significant failure in George Eliot. 17

George Eliot's deep feeling for Maggie, apparent in sympathetic inside views of her solitary suffering, has been noted. But it is not till towards the end that the narrator's vision is con-

sistently blurred by sympathy; along with the vision of her needs and the oft-repeated 'poor child' or 'poor Maggie' there runs a careful analysis of Maggie's illusions and deficiencies. Her egoism is emphasized in her continual desire for recognition of her cleverness - an egoism apparent even in her love, for she 'put forth large claims for herself where she loved strongly' (190), and her sorrow at her father's affliction is tempered by happiness at being given such an opportunity to show her affection. The fine balance in the presentation of Maggie is evident in this passage of analysis:

Poor child! as she leaned her head against the window-frame, with her hands clasped tighter and tighter, and her foot beating the ground, she was as lonely in her trouble as if she had been the only girl in the civilised world of that day who had come out of her school-life with a soul untrained for inevitable struggles ... with much futile information about Saxon and other kings of doubtful example - but unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her, which, governing the habits, becomes morality, and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion. (269)

The sympathetic response to Maggie's lot is sharpened, but not destroyed, by the awareness that she is not the only girl so deprived, and she is critically placed in relation to the novel's central moral norm - selfless resignation to one's subordinate place in the scheme of things.

The centre of values in the novel is found in the long quotations from Thomas à Kempis wherein Maggie believes she has discovered the clue to life that she so desperately craved. Irony is directed at Maggie's immature reaction to Kempis, but not at the writings themselves. In isolation a phrase like 'the old monk's out-
pourings' may seem faintly satirical, but not in the context of 'the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings' (271). Again Maggie's need is shown to be representative of a universal craving for meaning:

This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis - the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony: it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. Under such circumstances, there are many among its myriads of souls who have absolutely needed an emphatic belief: life in this unpleasurable shape demanding some solution even to unspeculative minds; just as you inquire into the stuffing of your couch when anything galls you there, whereas eider-down and perfect French springs excite no question. (272-3)

For George Eliot, the answer to this fundamental human need is to be found in a life of self-denial which gives the individual a secure standpoint outside of himself and frees him from the tyranny of selfish desires and discontent:

Some have an emphatic belief in alcohol, and seek their ekstasis or outside standing-ground in gin; but the rest require something that good society calls "enthusiasm," something that will present motives in an entire absence of high prizes, something that will give patience and feed human love when the limbs ache with weariness, and human looks are hard upon us - something, clearly, that lies outside personal desires, that includes resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves. (273)

'Resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves' - here is the key to moral action, the principle by which Maggie must act and be judged. The term "enthusiasm" may seem loaded, especially when used by an author who has rejected her evangelical upbringing, but here the irony is clearly directed at 'good society' which uses such terms to denigrate a basic human
need that it is too superficial to feel. Such good society with
'its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner-engage-ments six
weeks deep, its opera and its faéry ball-rooms' and with 'its sci-
ence done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy'(272)
has just been disposed of in a passage of heavy irony. "Enthusi-
asm" is something 'that will present motives in an entire absence
of high prizes' which, as has been seen, is precisely what George
Eliot sought to do through fiction in a society that had lost the
moral motive of religious faith.

Kempis' teaching has such unquestioned authority because it
springs directly from intense personal experience, experience
that is universal:

It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's
prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary, hidden an-
guish, struggle, trust and triumph - not written on velvet
cushions to teach endurence to those who are treading with
bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all
time a lasting record of human needs and human consola-
tions: the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and
suffered and renounced - in the cloister, perhaps, with
serge gown and tonsured head, with much chanting and long
fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours -
but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the
same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same fail-
ures, the same weariness. (272)

Finally, the validity of Maggie's new-found philosophy is judged
by its effect:

it was by being brought within the long lingering vibra-
tions of such a voice that Maggie, with her girl's face and
unnoted sorrows, found an effort and a hope that helped her
through years of loneliness, making out a faith for herself
without the aid of established authorities and appointed
guides - for they were not at hand, and her need was press-
ing. (273)
But if Maggie has here found the answer to her need, there is no sudden idealization of her. Her immaturity is still carefully placed: 'She had not perceived—how could she until she had lived longer?—the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly' (271).

Her renunciation is by no means yet complete:

She threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity. And so it came to pass that she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act. (273)

With keen perception the narrator points out that for Maggie renunciation of egoism is often just a subtler form of the same thing:

Tom was very hard to her, she used to think, in her long night-watchings—to her who had always loved him so; and then she strove to be contented with that hardness, and to require nothing. That is the path we all like when we set out on our abandonment of egoism—the path of martyrdom and endurance, where the palm-branches grow, rather than the steep highway of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame, where there are no leafy honours to be gathered and worn. (274)

While these shortcomings are given due weight in a balanced appraisal, the final judgement of Maggie's Kempis-inspired renunciation is deeply sympathetic:

That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth. Her mother felt the change in her with a sort of puzzled wonder that Maggie should be "growing up so good;" it was amazing that this once "contrary" child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will. (274)

But clearly the issue of renunciation versus desire is not settled yet; we are alerted to future possibilities by the ominous
ring of 'notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions.' Maggie's resolve awaits serious testing. This testing comes when she encounters Philip in the Red Deeps. And here doubts about the validity of Maggie's renunciation first arise. Despite Philip's argument that "it is not right to sacrifice everything to other people's unreasonable feelings" (283), Maggie bows to her father's irrational hatred of Wakem and refuses to agree to meet Philip. Maggie is not yet in love with Philip, but her action is almost equivalent to Juliet rejecting Romeo because of the hatred between their houses. George Eliot fully supports Maggie's action, seeing her as following a 'true prompting' (310). Philip's view that he is acting for Maggie's good in introducing her to a wider life is judged as a rationalization to excuse his own selfishness: 'If we only look far enough off for the consequence of our actions, we can always find some point in the combination of results by which those actions can be justified' (310).

From this point onwards there is a failure in the novel to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate resignation, between true and false devotion to others. A perverse, life-denying note begins to appear in Maggie's renunciation. She refuses Philip's offer of a novel because it "would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be - it would make me long to see and know many things - it would make me long for a full life" (288). She refuses the legitimate pleasures of "Poetry and art and knowledge" because she should "want too much" (288): "I was never satisfied with a little of anything. That is why it is better for
me to do without earthly happiness altogether'" (308). This is exactly the view of the fervid, ascetic George Eliot in her evangelical youth:

I do not deny that there may be many who can partake with a high degree of zest of all the lawful enjoyments the world can offer and yet live in near communion with their God; who can warmly love the creature, and yet be careful that their Creator maintains supremacy in their hearts; but I confess that in my short experience and narrow sphere of action I have never been able to attain this; I find, as Dr. Johnson said respecting his wine, total abstinence much easier than moderation. 18

The author herself outgrew this 'narrow asceticism,' yet she imposes the same regimen upon her heroine. Philip pleads passionately with Maggie:

'you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dulness all the highest powers of your nature. Joy and peace are not resignation: resignation is the willing endurance of a pain that is not allayed - that you don't expect to be allayed. Stupefaction is not resignation: and it is stupefaction to remain in ignorance - to shut up all the avenues by which the life of your fellow-men might become known to you.' (308)

Despite the force of this argument, Maggie has a 'deeper consciousness that, for any immediate application it had to her conduct, it was no better than falsity' (308). Into her resignation there enters something very close to a death wish: "I must wait - this life will not last long"' (288).

18 Letters, I, 6.
If Philip's arguments are discredited, at least one of his statements is proved correct by future events: "You will be thrown into the world some day," he tells Maggie, "and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite" (309). Many contemporary critics of the novel were less far-sighted; they were scandalized by Maggie's succumbing to a passion for Stephen Guest. 19

Swinburne was almost apoplectic with outrage:

If we are really to take it on trust, to confront it as a contingent or conceivable possibility, resting our reluctant faith on the authority of so great a female writer, that a woman of Maggie Tulliver's kind can be moved to any sense but that of bitter disgust and sickening disdain by a thing - I will not write, a man - of Stephen Guest's; if we are to accept as truth and fact, however astonishing and revolting, so shameful an avowal, so vile a revelation as this; in that ugly and lamentable case, our only remark, as our only comfort, must be that now at least the last word of realism has surely been spoken, the last abyss of cynicism has surely been sounded and laid bare. 20

Such vehemence testifies to the book's power in drawing the reader into sympathetic identification with the heroine, but it stems from a blindly idealized view of Maggie, a view that George Eliot did not share. In response to such criticism, she wrote to her publisher, Blackwood: 'If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable

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19 See, for example, The Guardian (25 April 1860) and The National Review (July 1860), George Eliot and Her Readers, pp. 33, 37.

to great error - error that is anguish to its own nobleness -
then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must
be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite the dismay of these highminded early critics, Mag-
gie's surrender to sexual passion seems entirely probable in view
of her intense, passionate nature and her severely repressed state.
We remember the 'volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions.' And
even more ominious is the present tense summary of Maggie's qualit-
ies and potentialities at a particular epoch in her life (just be-
fore she meets Philip in the Red Deeps):

One has a sense of uneasiness in looking at her - a sense of
opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent:
surely there is a hushed expression, such as one often sees
in older faces under borderless caps, out of keeping with the
resistant youth, which one expects to flash out in a sudden,
passionate glance, that will dissipate all the quietude, like
a damp fire leaping out again when all seemed safe. (281)

It is this suffocated, but not extinguished, fire of passion which
leaps out with startling suddenness when Maggie meets Stephen.

\textsuperscript{21} Letters, III, 318.
Stephen arouses in her as opposed to her pitying affection for Philip is neatly captured in her reaction to their singing. When Philip sang she 'was touched, not thrilled, by the song: it suggested distinct memories and thoughts, and brought quiet regret in the place of excitement.' But with the 'saucy energy' of Stephen's song 'Maggie in spite of her resistance to the spirit of the song and to the singer, was taken hold of and shaken by the invisible influence - was borne along by a wave too strong for her' (393).

The real critical problem, however, is not the credibility of Maggie's falling in love with Stephen, but the way that George Eliot judges this. There is, as Leslie Stephen comments, 'nothing contrary to experience in the supposition that the imagination of an impulsive girl may transfigure a very second-rate young tradesman into a lover worthy of her; but this does not excuse the author for sharing the illusion.' George Eliot is apparently blind to the universally acknowledged inadequacy of Stephen as Maggie's lover. In her view Maggie's great error is not that she falls in love with Stephen, but that she yields to her passion for him regardless of the claims of Lucy and Philip. There is no denying Lewis this point: 'There is no hint that, if Fate had allowed them to come together innocently, she wouldn't have found him a pretty satisfactory soulmate; there, for George Eliot, lies the tragedy - it is conscience that opposes.'

23 The Great Tradition, p. 56.
The author's sympathetic involvement in Maggie's situation is intense:

Such things, uttered in low broken tones by the one voice that has first stirred the fibre of young passion, have only a feeble effect - on experienced minds at a distance from them. To poor Maggie they were very near: they were like nectar held close to thirsty lips: there was, there must be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill - in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice. Stephen's passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities - all except the returning sunbeams which broke out on the waters as the evening approached, and mingled with the visionary sunlight of promised happiness - all except the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love. (442)

Ian Milner, in attempting to rebut Leavis's criticism, quotes this passage, then comments, 'Is there any confusion here of point of view? On the contrary, it is Maggie we see caught in an experience that is shown with utter clarity as her experience, and made compellingly natural. To "experienced minds at a distance from them" such things may not only have a "feeble effect " but seem a distasteful squandering of moral resources."24 It is true that there is here no confusion of point of view: George Eliot's view is distinct from Maggie's. Maggie's vision of a life in which 'affection would no longer be self-sacrifice' is clearly placed as unrealistic, but she is not judged for this; it is seen as the inevitable result of her pressing need and lack of distance from the experience. The author enters into her deprived state and

the importunity of her longing - unlike other 'experienced minds,' George Eliot does not remain at a detached distance. There is no suggestion that for George Eliot this is a 'distasteful squandering of moral resources.' There may be a squandering of emotional resources, but it is not distasteful to the author; she fully understands and sympathizes with Maggie's apprehension of the clash between duty and self-fulfilment that comprises the tragedy of her experience. There are suggestions that Maggie is projecting qualities on to Stephen under the pressure of her need (especially 'the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love'), but George Eliot shows no clear awareness that he is unworthy of her; the projection may be excessive but it is not placed in the way that Dorothea's projection on to Casaubon is. In presenting Stephen as a not improbable source of forbidden fulfilment, George Eliot lapses from the fine critical sense which distinguished her earlier treatment of Maggie. It is a failure of discrimination that recurs with the portrait of Ladislaw in Middlemarch.

But for all his inadequacy, Stephen has been treated harshly by most critics (especially the early reviewers) in their loyalty to Maggie. Even a modern critic can write: 'he is a vulgarian, ... a coxcomb and an insensitive egotist, ... a man without chivalry and without perception ... a man without conscience or principle.' 25 No doubt, for many readers, he never recovers from the

irony of his introduction: 'Mr. Stephen Guest, whose diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o'clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg's' (341). George Eliot obviously does not intend the initial irony to cut too deep, but she provides nothing to counter-balance this devastating picture of the indolent, conceited dilettante. The shallow, patronizing nature of his feeling for Lucy is very neatly placed: 'A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications. Stephen was not surprised to find himself in love with her, and was conscious of excellent judgement in preferring her to Miss Leyburn...' (348). How much this tells against Stephen depends largely on how much we are made to value and care for Lucy. Lucy is a very slight figure compared to Maggie, and early in the book appears as the disgustingly model child - we cheer when Maggie pushes her into the mud. The adult Lucy gains in stature throughout the final volume, and Stephen is palpably blind to her real qualities. Nonetheless, she remains in many ways a conventional 'pretty' creature to whom Stephen responds in the conventional manner.

To label Stephen 'an insensitive egotist' and 'a man without conscience' is to do him serious injustice. His befriending of the deformed and embittered Philip is seen as admirable, and he shows
considerable sensitivity towards Philip's susceptible nature. Unlike his trifling dalliance with Lucy, his love for Maggie is genuine and deep. He is seen to be possessed of much 'native honour' (445) in his behaviour towards her. Like Maggie he gains force and honour from the determination with which he struggles against his passion. Before the boating trip he has renounced her, and the drifting with the tide is initially as unintentional with him as it is with her. Through all this an imperfectly-realised intention is discernible. As Joan Bennett convincingly argues,

The author's intention is that, in total contrast to his deliberate choosing of Lucy, he shall be mastered by passionate love for a woman he would never have thought of choosing, and that the experience shall shatter his complacency, humble his masculine vanity and give a new depth to his character which will become capable of tragic suffering. There is not space enough for her to convince us of this development of Stephen's character, nor does she achieve for the reader sufficient intimacy with him to establish compassionate understanding.26

There is, one can't help feeling, a large element of female chauvinism in George Eliot's portrayal of the Maggie-Stephen relationship. The arrogant male must be humbled and made to see the once-scorned heroine's surpassing value. Stephen's earlier

26 Ibid., p. 119. Cf. George Eliot's acceptance of the criticism "that the tragedy is not adequately prepared. This is a defect which I felt even while writing the third volume, and have felt ever since the MS. left me. The 'epische Breite' into which I was beguiled by love of my subject in the two first volumes, caused a want of proportionate fullness in the treatment of the third, which I shall always regret" (Letters, III, 317). In fact, she felt that the third volume had 'the material of a novel compressed into it' (Letters, III, 285).
trifling and patronizing attitude not so much towards Lucy as to-
wards women in general is avenged through Maggie. The saucy
defiance of his song, "'Shall I, wasting in despair, / Die because
a woman's fair?" (393), is highly ironic in view of later develop-
ments: he does find himself 'wasting in despair' because of Mag-
gie's fairness. It is hard to resist the feeling that, in Mag-
gie's conquest of the handsome young buck and of St. Oggs' society,
George Eliot is enjoying something of a vicarious triumph. F.R.
Leavis has scored a sharp hit:

That Maggie Tulliver is essentially identical with the young
Mary Ann Evans we all know. She has the intellectual poten­
tiality for which the environment into which she is born does­
not provide much encouragement; she has the desperate need for
affection and intimate personal relations; and above all she
has the need for an emotional exaltation, a religious enthous­
iasm, that shall transfigure the ordinariness of daily life and
sweep her up in an inspired devotion of self to some ideal pur-
pose. There is, however, a difference between Maggie Tulliver
and Mary Ann Evans: Maggie is beautiful. She is triumphantly
beautiful, after having been the ugly duckling. The exper­
ience of a sensitive child in this latter role among insensit­
ive adults is evoked with great poignancy: George Eliot had
only to remember. The glow that comes with imagining the
duckling turned swan hardly needs analyzing...

As the book sweeps to its climax, authorial identification
with Maggie intensifies; George Eliot, as much as her heroine,

27 To a lesser degree, this female chauvinism enters into the port-
trait of Dorothea in Middlemarch; Lydgate's superficial judgement of
her is avenged by his seeing too late her true worth.

seems "Borne Along by the Tide" of feeling. There is considerable external testimony to her extraordinary involvement in the book's ending. The last volume was completed in eight weeks, and George Eliot says the last pages were written 'in a furoe.'\(^{29}\) Lewes wrote to Blackwood at this time that 'Mrs. Lewes is getting her eyes redder and swollener every morning as she lives through her tragic story.' Even a month after publication, George Eliot writes from Italy, 'I think Rome will at last chase away Maggie and the Mill from my thoughts: I hope it will, for she and her sorrows have clung to me painfully.'\(^{30}\) Such emotional pressure need not weaken the book; it can and does produce a vivid and moving climax to Maggie's moral struggles; but it also leads to a distortion of judgement, a failure of perspective.

The tangle of relationships in the final volume of \textit{The Mill on the Floss} constitutes perhaps the most complex moral dilemma George Eliot portrays in all her fiction. Consequently the problems of judgement are extreme - for characters, author, and reader alike. George Eliot is trying to resolve the issue of how a person should live, by what standards, to what ends. The principle she attempts to discover and affirm is altruism; the only fixed guideline in a godless universe is the happiness of others.

\(^{29}\) George Eliot: \textit{A Biography}, p. 319 and \textit{Letters}, III, 278.
Man must live by 'the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law which is to lift us into willing obedience and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse.'

This yardstick of judgement is successfully applied in Middlemarch, where all the characters are placed according to their individual degree of egotism and their ability to overcome it. But in judging Maggie's renunciation of Stephen, this principle eludes George Eliot because (as Joan Bennett points out) once Maggie has drifted down the river, whatever decision she makes on the following morning, she cannot avert the suffering that her yielding has caused.

The situation is changed; there is no longer a clear-cut distinction between the desires of self and the needs of others.

It would seem that George Eliot has been betrayed here by a desire to maintain the utmost suspense through keeping the issue of Maggie's moral conflict in abeyance for as long as possible. The struggle within Maggie is prolonged to the point where we, with Stephen, feel she cannot possibly turn back. But memories of her past life come to her aid 'in the last moments of possible rescue' (444). Perhaps George Eliot is also seeking to emphasize the remarkable strength of Maggie's moral nature - that she can resist temptation when, of all moments, it is most difficult to do.

31 Letters, V, 448.
In resisting Stephen, Maggie is kept from an otherwise desirable union by her selfless concern for Lucy and Philip. It is 'the deep pity for another's pain' and 'the divine presentiment of something higher than mere personal enjoyment' (432) which combats desire. The 'moral basis of her resistance' is 'the sense of others' claims' (440). When she comes to herself after drifting with the tide, Maggie attempts to assert this same moral basis in rejecting Stephen. In their passionate debate climaxing Bk. VI, George Eliot works out in dialectic form the central issues of the novel. Maggie argues that they must avoid "whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us" (448). When she is forced by Stephen to admit that it is now too late to avoid causing misery, she falls back on a subjective moral sense: "We can't choose happiness either for ourselves or for another: we can't tell where that will lie. We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment, or whether we will renounce that, for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us." (450). And again: "I don't know what is wise; but my heart will not let me do it" (451). Maggie's major moral decision is, then, not determined by reason or a 'spiritual law' but by impulse, by her heart's needs. A quite romantic notion of morality begins to dominate. She is drawn back from Stephen by the ties of the past - not because she can do anything to help those whom

33 It is significant that Maggie's resolution to return comes not after a period of reflection, but stems from a dream which is a resurgence of past claims welling up within her subconscious.
the past has made dependent on her, but because to deny those past ties would be to deny her own identity. If she were to submit to her feeling for Stephen, she would feel self-alienated, déraciné, adrift in an alien world: "it would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me. I can't set out on a fresh life, and forget that: I must go back to it, and cling to it, else I shall feel as if there were nothing firm beneath my feet" (451).

That Maggie should play herself into an impossible position by drifting down the river past the point of no return, and then act impulsively, quixotically, to escape, seems entirely consistent with the detailed picture the book has presented of her youthful character. Her childhood is one of continual mistakes and consequent regret - 'Maggie was always wishing she had done something different' (46). She evinces a seemingly congenital heedlessness of physical things (her failure to feed Tom's rabbits or to recognize when she has a fish on the line prepare for her oblivion on the river) and an impetuous perversity (seen in such acts as the cutting of her hair and mutilating her doll). As she grows up, she has the same unconscious other-worldliness that George Eliot portrays with greater assurance in the character of Dorothea. It therefore seems just right that she should act as she does to arrive in the worst possible situation - if she had eloped with Stephen she would not have been nearly so harshly condemned. Her decision to return is more fully 'in character' than George Eliot realizes. As R.T. Jones says, 'The choice is Maggie's supreme heroic folly; it is such a consummation as this, we see now, that her entire life has been lead-
George Eliot, however, fails to see the folly, the quixotic nature of Maggie's act; for her, the return to St. Oggs is simply noble and heroic. Maggie's struggle and resolution are recounted with complete sympathy; nowhere in the text is there any suggestion that she is misguided.

To convey Maggie's movement to the point of decision, George Eliot employs the technique of free indirect speech, or 'erlebte Rede,' which, while not as immediate as interior monologue, recaptures more of the actual diction, form, and rhythm of the character's thought-life than does formal indirect speech. While interior monologue renders the character's and indirect speech the narrator's distinct voice, free indirect speech tends often to merge the two points of view, as here:

The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed; she had brought sorrow into the lives of others — into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love. The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried her into the sins her nature had most recoiled from — breach of faith and cruel selfishness; she had rent the tights that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion. And where would that lead her? — where had it led her now? She had said that she would rather die than fall into that temptation. She felt it now — now that the consequence of such a fall had come before the outward act was completed. There was at least this fruit from all her years of striving after the highest and best — that her soul, though betrayed, beguiled, ensnared, could never deliberately consent to a choice of the lower.(444)


This diminishing of distance between narrator and character is characteristic of the latter part of the book. Throughout these last sections the author relies more on characters as mouthpieces (particularly Dr. Kenn, Philip, and Lucy) rather than on omniscient comment to express her judgement of Maggie. The decrease in commentary is a direct reflection of the decrease in authorial distance. Occasionally the narrator does stand back to make explicit her judgement, but even the generalizations reveal her close involvement with both the conflict and the decision of her heroine:

Did she lie down in the gloomy bedroom of the old inn that night with her will bent unwaveringly on the path of penitent sacrifice? The great struggles of life are not so easy as that; the great problems of life are not so clear. In the darkness of that night she saw Stephen's face turned towards her in passionate, reproachful misery; she lived through again all the tremulous delights of his presence with her that made existence an easy floating in a stream of joy, instead of a quiet resolved endurance and effort. (452)

There is revealed the novel's characteristic pattern of judgement: the dichotomy between indulgence, associated with drifting, moving unconsciously with the current, and renunciation, which means following a willed and resolved course.

Dr. Kenn is used as a spokesman to articulate more fully the author's judgement of Maggie's return:

the actual relations of all the persons concerned, forced upon him powerfully the idea of an ultimate marriage between Stephen and Maggie as the least evil.... On the other hand, he entered with all the comprehension of a man who had known spiritual conflict, and lived through years of devoted service to his fellow-men, into that state of Maggie's heart and conscience which made the consent to the marriage a desecration to her: her conscience must not be tampered with: the principle on which she had acted was a safer guide than any balancing of consequences. (468)
Dr. Kenn's authority is established by the omniscient commentary. As with Thomas à Kempis, it is personal experience (he 'had known spiritual conflict') which gives him the necessary sympathetic insight: the man qualified to judge others is he who has 'the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human' (469).

At first sight it appears paradoxical that George Eliot should endorse Maggie's impulsive action when so much of the emphasis of her fiction is on the value of clear-sighted awareness and rational control. Dorothea and Lydgate fall into unfortunate marriages through subordinating reason to dreams or feeling. It is by yielding to impulse and suppressing thought that Maggie and Stephen fall into temptation initially:

Neither of them had begun to reflect on the matter, or silently to ask, "To what does all this tend?" Maggie only felt that life was revealing something quite new to her; and she was absorbed in the direct, immediate experience, without any energy left for taking account of it, and reasoning about it. Stephen wilfully abstained from self-questioning, and would not admit to himself that he felt an influence which was to have any determining effect on his conduct. (379-80)

There is an ironic similarity between Maggie's trance-like state as she deserts Stephen ('Maggie was not conscious of a decision as she turned away from that gloomy averted face, and walked out of the room: it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention. What came after? A sense of stairs descended as if in a dream ...' [451-2]) and the day-dreaming which results in their being borne along by the tide in the first place: 'they spoke no
word; for what could words have been but an inlet to thought? and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped - it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze. Maggie was only dimly conscious ...' (437-8).

The answer to this seeming paradox is that, as much as she valued rational control, George Eliot saw reason as less important to moral action than spontaneous sympathetic feeling. In Joan Bennett's view, George Eliot's intention was to set a difficult moral problem the solution of which 'was to depend on the rational conception of virtue - the weighing of foreseeable consequences.' But it is precisely this utilitarian approach to ethics that George Eliot rejects. The evaluation implicit in the ending of The Mill on the Floss is made explicit in "Leaves from a Note-Book":

determining energy in human sympathy ... where it has only a magnificent futility, is more adorable, or as we say divine, than pitying force, or than a prudent calculation of results. Perhaps it is an implicit joy in the resources of our human nature which has stimulated admiration for acts of self-sacrifice which are vain as to their immediate end. 37


37 Essays, p. 451. Cf. George Eliot's comment on Jane Eyre: 'All self-sacrifice is good - but one would like it to be in a somewhat nobler cause than that of a diabolical law which chains a man soul and body to a putrefying carcass' (Letters, I, 268). Here there is some concern for the end, but there remains the absolute assertion, 'All self-sacrifice is good.' In light of such comments it might seem a moot point whether George Eliot's excessive identification with her heroine has distorted her moral judgement, or whether her moral scheme has dictated the course of the action and imposed a false evaluation on it. I feel the former view holds in light of the greater stress on the positive standard of altruism rather than the merely negative one of self-denial throughout George Eliot's fiction and non-fictional writings (and also in view of the stress on impulse, not principle, in Maggie's decision). Still, the frequency of such passages as that just quoted might suggest that George Eliot's outlook was less of a piece than is sometimes recognised.
In recounting her sense of release after renouncing evangelical Christianity, George Eliot stressed spontaneous feeling rather than 'the weighing of foreseeable consequences' as the source of morality:

I confess to you that I feel it an inexpressible relief to be freed from the apprehension ... that at each moment I tread on chords that will vibrate for weal or woe to all eternity.... It seems to me that the awful anticipations entailed by a reception of all the dogmas in the New Testament operate unfavourably on moral beauty by disturbing that spontaneity, that choice of the good for its own sake, that answers my ideal. 38

Maggie's action is, then, to be seen as admirable because it is inspired by spontaneous selfless feeling; the end achieved is of secondary importance. Fine feeling is celebrated as a good in itself. Of the myth of Marcus Curtius, George Eliot wrote, 'The impulse and act made the heroism, not the correctness of adaptation.' 39

The inadequacy of this view is only too apparent. The ends achieved as well as the motives involved must be taken into consideration in judging any action. The difficulty of acquiescing in the author's evaluation of Maggie is that her action, however selfless her feelings, does no one any good; in fact it only doubles the amount of unhappiness, since nothing can now save Lucy and Philip from the pain of realizing they are not loved. Her decision seems perverse, negative, a following of renunciation for its

38 Letters, I, 143-4 (3 August 1842).
own sake. The only purpose it serves is to clear her in the eyes of Lucy and Philip.

At times Maggie even appears to be acting, not under altruistic impulse, but from an egotistic desire to preserve the purity of her own conscience. She tells Stephen, "I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God. I have caused sorrow already - I know - I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it" (449). It is too late to avert others' pain, but not too late to preserve her own conscience, since she never consciously chose to cause that pain. She appears not to be fleeing from hurting others, but from moral taint: "Dear, dear Stephen, let me go! - don't drag me into deeper remorse. My whole soul has never consented - it does not consent now" (451).

The text makes plain that Maggie's feeling for Stephen is more than mere infatuation; yet she attempts to kill this feeling: 'She must wait - she must pray - the light that had forsaken her would come again: she should feel again what she had felt, when she had fled away, under an inspiration strong enough to conquer agony - to conquer love' (485). Stephen's letter affirms that his feeling, too, is no mere superficial passion from which he will recover in the cold light of reason and separation; it is a love of intensity, quality, and duration. The imagery used to describe Maggie's position is highly significant:

When Maggie first read this letter she felt as if her real temptation had only just begun. At the entrance of the chill dark cavern, we turn with unworn courage from the warm light; but how, when we have trodden far in the damp darkness, and
have begun to be faint and weary — how, if there is a sudden opening above us, and we are invited back again to the life-nourishing day? The leap of natural longing from under the pressure of pain is so strong, that all less immediate motives are likely to be forgotten — till the pain has been escaped from. (484)

As Ian Milner justly remarks, 'Images of darkened and dank enclosed space — caves, vaults, passage-ways, tombs — are habitually used by George Eliot to suggest life-denying states of being or experiences, as contrasted with images of light and warmth that denote what is "life-nourishing."'40 In *Middlemarch* the former type of imagery surrounds the lifeless Casaubon, while Dorothea sees her relationship with Will Ladislaw as 'a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air' (386). Despite the author's intention, the imagery used here places the perversity of Maggie's renunciation.

A vital part of the scheme of judgement at this point is the way in which Lucy and Philip react to Maggie's return to St. Ogg's. Their forgiveness is used to vindicate Maggie's decision by showing that it leads to restoration of old and valued relationships. But there is no evidence that meaning and fulfilment for Maggie lie in these relationships. The final scene in the Red Deep before Tom intervenes (Bk. V, Ch. iv) presents the height of Maggie's involvement with Philip before she meets Stephen. This is the first time she even considers the possibility of being in love with

Philip, and the narrator makes clear the tenuous nature of her feeling: 'It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive - when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves flood-marks which are never reached again' (316). Altogether the scene is far too slight and equivocal to create a convincing sense of a real commitment that would militate against an attachment to Stephen. Philip himself realizes he is not 'in the position of Maggie's accepted, acknowledged lover' (402) and admits "I have no just claim on you for more than affectionate remembrance" (474). It is pity above all that dominates in Maggie's affection for Philip; he can help satisfy her cultural and intellectual hunger, but there is no question of him fulfilling her need for passionate love as Stephen does. Stephen's cogent argument against Maggie's return is never effectively answered: "even if we could go back, and both fulfil our engagements - if that were possible now - it would be hateful - horrible, to think of your ever being Philip's wife - of your ever being the wife of a man you didn't love" (449).

Amidst the turmoil of her attraction to Stephen, Maggie looks back on her relationship with Philip as a refuge of peace:

the fact that in him the appeal was more strongly to her pity and womanly devotedness than to her vanity or other egoistic excitability of her nature, seemed now to make a sort of sacred place, a sanctuary where she could find refuge from an alluring influence which the best part of herself must resist, which must bring horrible tumult within, wretchedness without. (386)

But this is another example of the trickery of memory, of the
falsifying retrospective view; for, far from being a haven of peace and tranquility, her earlier relationship with Philip only served to quicken her latent discontent and resulted in bitter strife with Tom:

the pleasure which had ended in today's misery had perturbed the clearness and simplicity of her life. She used to think in that time that she had made great conquests, and won a lasting stand on serene heights above worldly temptations and conflict. And here she was down again in the thick of a hot strife with her own and others' passions. (327)

Perhaps part of the reason why the bond between Maggie and Philip isn't made definite lies in George Eliot's desire to avoid too harsh a judgement of Maggie by contemporary readers. A strongly-felt sense of her attachment to Philip would have made her succumbing to Stephen seem especially treacherous. Likewise the tie between Stephen and Lucy is made tenuous: that they are not actually engaged (though this is expected) is twice emphasized (344, 349). In seeking to secure a sympathetic response to Maggie and to make her tragedy as poignant as possible (that is, to present her as not merely under the sway of sensual desire, but as having to renounce what, in other circumstances, would have been a fulfilling love), George Eliot has tipped the balance too far so that the strongest moral claims seem (at least to a modern reader)

4.1 Note too how the omniscient narrator, in the interests of a sympathetic judgement of Maggie, avoids a direct presentation of the impact of the elopement on Lucy. We are only given Tom's brief report: "she's ill - unable to speak - my mother can't go near her, lest she should remind her of you" (457).
to be on Stephen's side. One cannot help feeling that the conventional morality, which George Eliot disregarded in real life, here took its revenge in her art. Maggie is made to appear to be giving up an intense, life-giving relationship for ties that are weak or non-existent.

According to the author's estimation, Maggie's desertion of Stephen is an act of heroic renunciation, a moral triumph in the face of almost insuperable odds. Having lived through deeply-felt temptation she now knows the true meaning of renunciation; she has won through to 'that sad patient living strength which holds the clue of life' (444) that she had sought. It is difficult to find support for this evaluation in the aftermath. Instead of finding satisfaction and fulfilment, this becomes her time of greatest despair and alienation:

She must be a lonely wanderer; she must go out among fresh faces, that would look at her wonderingly, because the days did not seem joyful to her; she must begin a new life, in which she would have to rouse herself to receive new impressions - and she was so unspeakably, sickeningly weary! There was no home, no help for the erring; even those who pitied were constrained to hardness. (483)

It becomes obvious, too, that Maggie's inner conflict is still unresolved, the future is still uncertain: 'her own weakness haunted her like a vision of hideous possibilities' (464). She is still 'battling with the old shadowy enemies that were for ever slain and rising again' (481). Her overcoming the second temptation of Stephen's letter is meant to be taken as guaranteeing final
victory; but the delicacy of the balance, and the power the letter has to move her (how would she react in Stephen's presence?) undermine that assurance.

Nor is there any suggestion that Maggie wins through to a greater knowledge of human nature or a wider vision of life by her suffering. She herself craves and asserts such a vision, but it is not shown: 'Surely there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know?' (485-6). She doesn't have that cathartic rebirth through suffering into enlarged life that is the traditional pattern of tragedy, and climaxes Dorothea's experience in Middlemarch. Increasingly she comes to evince a despairing death wish. Having received Stephen's letter she sits unconscious, 'with no image of rest coming across her mind, except of that far, far off rest, from which there would be no more waking for her into this struggling earthly life' (482). The longing becomes more pronounced in her soliloquy before the flood: "I will bear it, and bear it till death .... But how long it will be before death comes .... O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort ...." (485-6).

42 Note how the letter arrives when Maggie is in her lowest, most vulnerable state. She has just been put off as governess at the Rectory by Kenn acting under pressure from his parishioners, and is overwhelmed by 'a new sense of desolation' (483). There is also a hint of the traditional supreme testing in the letter arriving on 'the third day' after Kenn's advice.
The suddenness with which the flood follows upon Maggie's prayer is quite ludicrous. It appears as though the flood is in immediate answer to Maggie's prayer. Such an affirmation would be unconvincing in a novelist of orthodox belief, but in the agnostic George Eliot it reads like a parody of religious faith. However, it is not the timing of the flood so much as the nature of its use to which objection must be made. It is not a simple question of improbability. The frequent river-imagery, the many references to death by drowning, the stories and legends of past floods, all prepare for the event. But till now the river has played no part in the plot—except indirectly through Mr. Tulliver's vexatious penchant for litigation over water-rights. Therefore, as Barbara Hardy comments, 'The foreshadowings strike us as artificial because they are uninvolved with action. There is the sense of a restless preparation in rhetoric which does not move dynamically with events and characters.' A quite extrinsic element is brought in to resolve the central moral conflict; it is patently an escape mechanism from the difficulties of author and character alike.

43 Comparison might be made with the role of Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native which is an inescapable part of the characters' lives and destinies. Man in George Eliot may be closely related to a particular environment (which becomes an important element in his identity), but he is not, as in Hardy, related to the great impersonal forces sweeping through all of Nature. In George Eliot there is not the same sense of Nature as an independent entity, as something completely other than man—albeit at times working through him.

Coupled with the flood is the death's-door reconciliation with Tom, which is the final spurious assertion of Maggie's moral triumph. Throughout the novel Maggie's powerful need for union with Tom is apparent, as is the unlikeliness of her ever experiencing it. Tom repeatedly rebuffs her advances, meeting her warm outpourings of affection with impatience or harsh, vindictive self-righteousness. Before she succumbs to Stephen she is estranged from Tom because of her refusal to cut Philip. When she returns to St. Ogg's he cruelly spurns her and drives her from the family home. The ending, then, shows the author acquiescing in Maggie's wish—fulfilment. Here is the improbable reconciliation that Maggie has dreamt of, and which George Eliot allows her to realize against all the dictates of truth to reality that she claimed as her aesthetic standard. As in the reconciliations with Lucy and Philip, George Eliot attempts to justify Maggie's renunciation by showing that it leads to the restoration of all old ties. But again the true nature of the past is lost in retrospection. Both the suddenness and the nature of Tom's conversion betray the uncritical impulse to wish-fulfilment. He instantly comes, not only to accept Maggie, but also (in a moment of almost religious vision) to see her transcendent goodness, and worships in awe-struck humility:

It was not till Tom had pushed off and they were on the wide water—his face to face with Maggie—that the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force—it was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life that had lain beyond his vision, which he had fancied so keen and clear—that he was unable to ask a question. They sat mutely gazing at each other: Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face—Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation.
Thought was busy though the lips were silent: and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort. But at last a mist gathered over the blue-grey eyes, and the lips found a word they could utter: the old childish - "Maggie!"

Here at last is the recognition of her worth that Maggie has always craved and always been denied. No wonder she is convulsed with "a long deep sob of that mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain" (490).

To be successful the novel must resolve not only Maggie's internal conflict, but also the tensions of the dramatic relationships between the characters. According to Sheldon Sacks's definition, the organizing principle' of a novel is that 'it introduces characters, about whose fates we are made to care, in unstable relationships which are then further complicated until the complication is finally resolved by the removal of the represented instability.'

Despite Lucy's forgiveness and Philip's discovery of self-renouncing love, the major element of instability in the plot, Stephen, remains. Herein lies much of the unsatisfactoriness of the novel's conclusion. Stephen is still recalcitrantly committed to his passion for Maggie, vehemently denying the validity of renunciation. He claims to love her 'with that single overpowering passion, that worship, which a man never gives to a woman more than

45 Fiction and the Shape of Belief, p. 26. Admittedly Sacks's definition is inadequate for many purposely open-ended modern novels; but it is relevant to The Mill on the Floss, for here George Eliot is obviously seeking to achieve resolution at the end.
once in his life' (484). In face of this the final chapter's hint that he eventually returns to Lucy ('One of them visited the tomb again with a sweet face beside him - but that was years after'[492]), is quite unconvincing. A believable reunion of Lucy and Stephen was needed to justify Maggie's self-denial, but this is little more than a gesture at equilibrium.

As was seen earlier, at the heart of George Eliot's moral view lies a belief in the irrevocability of our actions. It is indicative of the falseness of the novel's conclusion that she sweeps aside this central doctrine, and tries to convince us that other people's happiness can be salvaged by Maggie's return. The tentativeness with which the ultimate marriage of Lucy and Stephen is stated suggests that George Eliot could not really bring herself to accept a notion of recoverable happiness.

Though incontestably of major rank, especially in its power to revivify and place childhood and adolescent experience, The Mill on the Floss is a flawed novel. Apart from an occasional tendency to idealize the past, George Eliot maintains a successfully balanced perspective on her heroine throughout her childhood and adolescence. Skilfully manipulating point of view, she enters with illuminating sympathy into Maggie's experience without losing the critical detachment that notes her excesses and immaturity. Increasing identification with both Maggie's attachment to the past and her longing for self-fulfilment seems to me to subvert the author's finely-controlled perspective in the portrayal of Maggie's adult relationships with Philip and Stephen. This is apparent in a rather uncritical
estimate of the validity of both past ties and renunciation, and also of Stephen. After Maggie's return from Mudport, overwhelming compassion leads to a contrived and sentimental conclusion in an attempt to justify her decision. This results in a two-fold and allied failure to resolve either the complicated dramatic relationships or Maggie's personal quest for meaning. And, by extension, this involves a failure to resolve the serious universal questions the novel has raised about the ends and values of life. Or rather, there is imposed a specious resolution that results from a false or uncritical estimate of what has gone before. In the early part of the book, the characters' inability to see beyond their immediate griefs was juxtaposed with the omniscient narrator's view, which, embracing past and future, revealed the transience of childhood griefs (and joys). As Maggie grows to adulthood, the author is able to offer no such compensating view; identifying with Maggie, she is overcome by the prospect of a lifetime of harsh self-abnegation unalleviated by joy. The tragedy of incompatible circumstances that she has created is too much for George Eliot to bear; she recoils, and tries to transmute it into unreal triumph.
Middlemarch today enjoys the status of an acknowledged masterpiece. It is, in Virginia Woolf's singular judgement, 'one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.' For a more recent critic, Arnold Kettle, 'it is in some respects the most impressive novel in our language and one which it is not ridiculous to compare with the novels of Tolstoy.' In assigning *Middlemarch* pre-eminence among George Eliot's (if not all nineteenth-century English) novels, mid-twentieth-century criticism has largely reversed the late-Victorian view which, taking its cue from Leslie Stephen, saw Romola as marking a water-shed between the freshness and vitality of George Eliot's successful earlier works and the relative aridity of the overly-cerebral later novels. While this crude distinction had some justice (particularly when applied to Romola and parts of Daniel Deronda), it was seriously blind to the distinction and strength of Middlemarch.

Most modern criticism of the novel suffers no such deficiency. Yet, in such criticism, there is often a marked lessening of intensity, an atmosphere of measured respect - as in an act of official homage. There is not the felt rigour of a strenuous effort to come to terms with a puzzlingly mixed work. Differing evaluations of George Eliot


more often reflect differences of taste rather than of interpretation. It is interesting, in comparing George Eliot with Hardy, to note how the nature of the criticism each attracts reflects the dissimilar quality of their art. Precisely because Hardy's art is made up of such diverse and often conflicting literary and emotional attitudes, there is a continual stimulus (reflected in publishers' lists) to reappraisal. Hardy criticism, therefore, tends to be very much concerned with evaluation, while George Eliot critics concentrate more on exposition and formal analysis.

Perhaps more daunting for the critic of Middlemarch than the novel's lofty status is its sheer bulk. All criticism must, perforce, be schematic and therefore inadequate to the complexity of the experienced work; but with a novel of these dimensions a unified and comprehensive coverage seems well-nigh unobtainable. It is not surprising that the most satisfying discussion — that by David Daiches in the Studies in English Literature series — is also one of the longest and moves in a leisurely sequential manner through the book, almost recreating the reader's experience of the novel's massive, interwoven texture and measured movement.

Intensifying the problem of its size is the novel's seeming diffuseness. Unlike the other novels that have been examined, Middlemarch has no one central character or dominant plot line. Failing to see any principle of unity at work, some critics have

concurred with Henry James's judgement that 'Middlemarch is a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole.' James's grievance, no doubt, springs from his own fictional preoccupation with the psychological drama of a central consciousness and his consequent wish that the predicament of Dorothea (which has marked affinities with that of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady) had been given pre-eminence in the novel.

But, despite the prejudicial view of as authoritative a judge as James, Middlemarch is a well unified whole, and its unity does derive from a central consciousness. Various critics, seeking to defend George Eliot against James's charges, have made good cases for the novel's narrative, thematic, and metaphoric unities. Yet their very number indicates that these are but aspects of unity; what really binds the novel together is the all-pervasive presence of the omniscient author.

The extraordinary quality of Middlemarch is that its enormous complexity is under almost complete control. All of the characters come into the author's understanding and (with one or two partial exceptions) under her judgement. There is not the tendency, often apparent in Dickens, for a character to assume an independent vitality quite apart from the design of the whole. No character seduces


the author's imagination and runs away with her judgement in the way
Eustacia does with Hardy in *The Return of the Native*. Nor does any
character at times move outside of the author's comprehension as does
Tess of the d’Urbervilles. That none of the characters manage to
escape to an independent life outside the author's understanding in-
dicates not an attenuated, abstract novel but rather the power and
sensitivity of the mind here at work. After one has read *Middle-
march*, W.J. Harvey's claim seems no hyperbole: 'of all English novel-
ists, George Eliot has the best mind.' Though less fully dramatized,
the author is here, as in all her novels, the most fully realized
of her own creations:

When we have passed in review the works of that great writer who
calls herself George Eliot ... what form, as we move away, per-
sists on the field of vision, and remains the chief centre of
interest for the imagination? The form not of Tito, or Maggie,
or Dinah, or Silas [or even, we might add, of Dorothea or Lyd-
gate], but of one who, if not the real George Eliot, is that
"second self" who writes her books, and lives and speaks through
them. Such a second self of an author is perhaps more substan-
tial than any mere human personality encumbered with the accid-
ents of flesh and blood and daily living. It stands at some
distance from the primary self, and differs considerably from
its fellow. It presents its person to us with fewer reserves;
it is independent of local and temporary motives of speech or
of silence; it knows no man after the flesh; it is more than
an individual; it utters secrets, but secrets which all men of
all ages are to catch; while, behind it, lurks well pleased the
veritable historical self secure from impertinent observation
and criticism.8

7 Introduction to the Penguin English Library edition, p. 7.
8 Edward Dowden, *Contemporary Review* (August 1872) in *A Century of
George Eliot Criticism*, pp. 64–5.
This 'second self' or 'implied author' is, for the reader, not only the most interesting person in the novel, but also the one with whom he tends to identify. This may seem self-evident of any omniscient novel where the characters, being less informed or less intelligent, are subject to the narrator's irony; and it is true of novelists like Fielding and Thackeray. But it is not so with Hardy, who adopts an impersonal, detached stance, seeking to keep even his fictional 'second self' (and surely more of the actual author is invested in his fictional persona than this term implies) secure from the reader's 'impertinent observation' or too easy assumption of familiarity.

By identification here, I mean our tendency to align ourselves with the author's scale of values, to agree with his judgements, and to accept his concerns as our own. In a more literal sense, of course, we identify with Hardy in a way we never do with George Eliot. While sharing George Eliot's moral perspective, we do not wholly merge with her emotional response to characters; indeed when her emotional response obtrudes too directly (as at times with 'poor Maggie' in The Mill on the Floss), we are alienated more than we are by Hardy's obtrusions of feeling in Tess, because Maggie is not made as immediate to

9 Wayne C. Booth argues that the narrator of a novel is 'seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist' (The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 73). This may be generally true, but it seems to me that the omniscient narrator of Middlemarch can be taken as identical with the implied author since there is no apparent irony to separate the two. What irony does play upon the narrator is self-irony.
us as Tess. In Hardy's best novels we identify with the author's response to his characters, not with the author by himself. In other words, Hardy does not allow himself nearly so much independent life in his fictional world apart from his apprehension of characters and events. Too much of the man is hidden for us to feel we know him in the way we know George Eliot; yet within the limited experience of the book, our knowledge has been, in a sense, more intimate than it ever is with her.

This is not to suggest that George Eliot indulges in the seemingly casual chattiness of a Fielding or Trollope. Much as she admired Fielding's charm when he seemed 'to bring his armchair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English,' she felt the dangers of following his digressive example:

But Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs), when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings. We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. (147-8)

In her earlier fiction George Eliot was prone to make frequent direct appeals to the reader of the kind that annoy because they assume an intimacy that has not been earned. In Middlemarch her tone is much better controlled; it is personal, compared to Hardy's, yet dignified and authoritative, since she does not need to reassure herself by direct appeal of the reader's continuing attention.

The greater narrative poise of Middlemarch, as compared to The Mill on the Floss, involves the relation of the narrator both to the reader and to her materials. As we have seen, George Eliot was
intend on portraying everyday, majority experience rather than the unusual or ideal. In *The Mill on the Floss* she is still on the defensive and feels forced to make a serious and lengthy reply to the anticipated criticism of her subject:

It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons—irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith—moved by none of those wild uncontrollable passions which create the dark shadows of misery and crime—without that primitive rough simplicity of wants, that hard, submissive, ill-paid toil, that childlike spelling out of what nature has written, which gives it poetry to peasant life....I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but ... (254)

In *Middlemarch*, in contrast, the author has overcome her diffidence; now the assured artist, she has much less need to resort to direct rhetoric in support of the essential dignity and worth (and therefore potential tragedy) of common lives,¹⁰ and when she does so she is no longer on the defensive. Of Lydgate's monetary problems she writes,

His troubles will perhaps appear miserably sordid, and beneath the attention of lofty persons who can know nothing of debt except on a magnificent scale. Doubtless they were sordid; and for the majority, who are not lofty, there is no escape from sordidness but by being free from money-craving, with all its base hopes and temptations, its watching for death, its hinted requests, its horse-dealer's desire to make bad work pass for good. (693-4)

George Eliot can now, as in the digression 'on the means of elevating a low subject' (363), mock the reader whose false gentility is offended by the commonness of the lives and deeds represented. But the irony here is not one-sided (and this demonstrates the superb balance

¹⁰ One obvious exception is the passage, quoted previously, on the 'element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency' (207).
of the book's point of view) - the narrator includes herself as well as the reader in her ironic regard. A particularly fine example of this two-edged irony occurs in the introduction of the Raffles-Rigg plot complication:

Having made this rather lofty comparison I am less uneasy in calling attention to the existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be well, certainly, if we could help to reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving occasion to their existence. (442)

The controlled distance in the author-reader relationship in Middlemarch is, then, closely connected with the author's more assured relation to her work. (The control of distance will later be examined in more detail in connection with individual characters). Conversely, in The Mill on the Floss the direct and familiar address to the reader is bound up with the author's unstable relationship with her characters. The author seeks to draw the reader into her own close involvement with the heroine - 'a tall dark-eyed figure, that we know well' (455). Intimacy is assumed both ways, and the reader is implicated in the author's lack of distance. In Middlemarch the reader has more freedom because the author is more confident of his sympathetic response.

It is this admirably balanced tone and controlled judgement which make the reader so ready to identify with the narrator's point of view. Henry James, for all his criticism of George Eliot's so-called moralizing tendencies, could not but admire the authorial voice in her fiction: there rises from her novels, he wrote, 'a kind of
fragrance of moral elevation; a love of justice, truth, and light; a large, generous way of looking at things; and a constant effort to hold high the torch in the dusky spaces of man's conscience. 11

The narrator embodies the standard of wisdom and maturity against which all the characters are judged; that is, the novel's ethical norms are not merely stated abstractly, but are brought alive by being acted out within the work. What Wayne Booth says of Fielding might well be applied to George Eliot: 'the author is always there on [her] platform to remind us, through[her] wisdom and benevolence, of what human life ought to be and might be.' 12

But, unlike Fielding, George Eliot does not flaunt her omniscience, does not draw attention to her ability to control events. She is placed above the characters primarily by her moral superiority; unlike Hardy, she does not look down upon them and dwarf them by right of her superior position in time. Even her obvious moral superiority does not result in a condescending attitude towards the people of her fictional world. If they are not viewed as puppets, they are no more seen as mere knaves or fools - a far cry from the world of Vanity Fair. The scrupulous care which she takes to be true to her characters' view of reality, the amount of attention devoted to their inner lives, gives them indestructible human dignity. Furthermore, the narrator is kept from a condescending pose by being involved in the same sphere of action as the characters: like them


she is embroiled in the moral conflicts of life. Here Eliot differs most markedly from Hardy who, as we have seen, seeks to avoid the emotional pressures and moral conflicts of life by withdrawing to a remote, ghostly vantage point from which he broods over the spectacle of human suffering. Within her fictional world, George Eliot is as actively engaged as any of her idealistic protagonists in the search for a rational order, a source of values, and in the struggle to secure justice and compassion for the lives about her. At times the author's involvement with her materials appears to be assuming the proportions of a plot about a plot in a manner that recalls the more desperate struggle of Tristram Shandy:

I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (148)

Most of her dramatized effort in the fictional world, however, is directed towards securing a just response to its inhabitants. Often this places the narrator in the position of advocate making a direct appeal on behalf of a character:

If to Dorothea Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions, does it follow that he was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgements concerning him? I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs Cadwallader's contempt for a neighbouring clergymen's alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam's poor opinion of his rival's legs, - from Mr. Brooke's failure to elicit a companion's ideas, or from Cella's criticism of a middle-aged scholar's personal appearance. I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors; and even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon, must submit to have the facial angle of a bumpkin. (84-5)
It is just this sort of involvement in her fictional world for which George Eliot has come under most attack from her own day to the present. Her tendency to usurp the centre stage and generalize about the dramatic scene is especially deplorable to those critics with a doctrinaire bias against authorial 'intrusions.' Even a sympathetic critic like Walter Allen complains that 'George Eliot ... lectures us and sometimes even hectors us.... She is too self-conscious, too anxious that we should not misunderstand the point that the incidents and episodes of her novels should make themselves.'

But this view misses the function of George Eliot's commentary and fails to appreciate the essential character of her art. The generalizing comments are not (as F. George Steiner would have it) 'attempts to persuade us of what should be artistically evident'; nor do they crudely seek to point a moral from the action. Instead their function is to universalize the significance of fictional events, to place all in the widest possible human context, so that the novel illuminates the reader's seemingly disparate experiences and the experience of life irradiates the novel - for the comments are always rooted in and grow out of the dramatic situation. The reader is all the time challenged to judge the validity of the novel's picture of life by comparing it with his own experience and to reconsider his view of reality in light of the novelist's perceptions.


The novel is, therefore, a particularly probing 'criticism of life'; it sharpens our awareness of human life and behaviour in general and calls for heightened self-awareness: 'Let any lady who is inclined to be hard on Mrs Cadwallader inquire into the comprehensiveness of her own beautiful views, and be quite sure that they afford accommodation for all the lives which have the honour to co-exist with hers' (59). The challenge to self-examination is not usually as explicit or heavily ironic as this; more often it is implicit in the generalizations which bring us to recognize how we participate in like illusions and follies with the characters, and therefore come under the same judgement. We find ourselves in kinship with even the religious hypocrisy of Bulstrode:

He was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs. If this be hypocrisy, it is a process which shows itself occasionally in us all, to whatever confession we belong.... This implicit reasoning is essentially no more peculiar to evangelical belief than the use of wide phrases for narrow motives is peculiar to Englishmen. There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men. (663-4)

Hence, paradoxically, the generalizations do not (as many critics claim) distance us from the characters, but rather draw reader and characters (and narrator) together into a larger community; the character's experience is no longer regarded as unique, but as something we all share. Here George Eliot's omniscient technique so amply suberves the moral purpose of her art: 'Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.' ("The Natural History of German Life," Essays, p. 271).
George Eliot's world remains peculiarly accessible for the reader even when far separated in time and social custom. It is much more accessible than many modern novels because the author seeks continuously not only to relate the fictional to the real, but also to discover the universal and abiding amid individual, ephemeral experience. Her comments are, as W.J. Harvey points out in a fine defence of her method, 'in the main, the sober, unemphatic and mature statement of those great commonplaces of human nature, those basic facts of life that underlie all human situations, real or imaginary.'

Being so just, balanced, and seemingly untendentious, her observations readily win the reader's acceptance. Harvey is right in seeing George Eliot's use of omniscience as more successful than Hardy's because his comments derive from a debatable metaphysic whereas she is careful to subdue her own brand of determinism so that the various psychological and economic forces moulding her characters are submerged in the very texture of the novel and rarely appear in the aggressive directness of an author's comment. Her whole bias ... is anti-dogmatic and anti-doctrinal, and it is precisely when Hardy's comments issue in something akin to doctrine that we feel uncomfortable about his novels.

This judgement is an important corrective to the view, beginning with Trollope and established by James, that George Eliot is more of a philosopher than a novelist. Yet there is still more to be said.

16 Ibid., p. 83.
17 See Trollope: 'in studying her latter writings, one feels oneself to be in company with some philosopher rather than with a novelist' (Autobiography [London, 1883, 1946], p. 219). James wrote, 'the novel... for her, was not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example' (Atlantic Monthly [May 1885] in George Eliot: The Critical Heritage, p. 497).
against such a view. It must be recognized that, however generalized, the authorial commentary is not the product of the intellect alone. George Eliot's comments bear such authority because they obviously spring from the direct experience of life. The commentary is of course highly intellectual; it is the product of a very fine mind. But the thought is thoroughly grounded in a deep emotional life.

The richness of the commentary stems not only from this intensity of 'felt life,' but also from the extraordinary breadth of the author's intuitive understanding. Thoughts and feelings that one would expect to lie quite out of her experience she not only presents convincingly but also comments upon astutely. Within her fictional limits, she does indeed convince us 'that nothing in the world was alien to her.' She is abundantly possessed of Shakespearian 'negative capability,' though without the impersonality which that term implies. This astounding breadth and subtlety of apprehension more than compensates for the limitations in the novel's external scope.

18 Henry James's praise was without the qualification: 'What is remarkable, extraordinary - and the process remains inscrutable and mysterious - is that this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures, without extravagance, assumption, or bravado, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multifold life of men' (Review of J.W. Cross's Life, Atlantic Monthly [May 1885] in George Eliot: The Critical Heritage, p. 504). An 'English lady' devoid of animal spirits, extravagance, or adventures is hardly the Marian Evans we know today, but the one-sided view is no doubt the fault more of Cross's biography than of James.
It imbues the narrator with a 'supra-personal' identity, so that 'she' seems to have well-nigh omniscient wisdom in this world as well as in the world of the novel.19

It should be obvious, then, that to dismiss all authorial comments out of hand as 'intrusions' is absurd. Their success or failure depends upon their individual content, style, and tone. When George Eliot trundles on to centre stage in this manner -

And here I must vindicate a claim to philosophical reflectiveness, by remarking that Mr Brooke on this occasion little thought of the Radical speech which, at a later period, he was led to make on the incomes of the bishops. What elegant historian would neglect a striking opportunity for pointing out that his heroes did not foresee the history of the world, or even their own actions? - For example, that Henry of Navarre, when a Protestant baby, little thought of being a Catholic monarch; or that Alfred the Great, when he measured his laborious nights with burning candles, had no idea of future gentlemen measuring their idle days with watches. Here is a mine of truth, which, however vigorously it may be worked, is likely to outlast our coal. (65)

- the reader naturally winces. Here the narrator is self-importantly and self-consciously thrusting in upon the action. The commentary is not used to enrich our understanding of the character's situation or of real life, but to draw attention to the narrator; it is merely an opportunity to air her learning and knowingness.

It is true that the tone is ironic, and much of the irony is directed

19 It is significant that in her early fiction George Eliot was able to preserve the illusion of male authorship implied by the then unrevealed pseudonym. (One undeceived reader, however, was Dickens). The secret of authorship was, of course, out long before the writing of Middlemarch, so that 'George Eliot' had no need to strive to create a fictitiously masculine persona. But the distinctive quality of the narrator's voice in this novel is such that it seems to transcend the limitations of either femininity or masculinity.
towards the narrator. But the self-mockery is irritatingly arch and affected. Moreover, George Eliot goes right on to do the very thing she mocks - rather like the after-dinner speaker who laments the tendency of after-dinner speakers to tell flat jokes before telling one himself. However self-aware George Eliot may be, there is no getting around the fact that the insight advanced is still trite; and the ponderous irony of the final sentence does nothing to redeem it.

Happily, such failures are rare, and in Middlemarch they stand out the more for the general quality of the commentary. Even generalizations spun from the experience of quite minor characters show this quality:

We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner-time; keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries say, 'Oh, nothing!' Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts - not to hurt others. (61)

Here the comment does not (as in the previous example) simply state the obvious about the dramatic situation, but gives Sir James Chettam's experience special poignance and resonance. By only hinting at Sir James's reaction to Dorothea's refusal, the comment becomes an effective understatement in place of dramatic presentation. The idea expressed - that pride can motivate to selfless action - is not platitudinous, and yet the fictional experience can be referred to that of each reader rather than to remote historical parallels. 20 And the

20Here we see the novelist's characteristic use of the personal pronouns, 'we,' 'us,' and 'our' to draw reader, character, and narrator together in an assumed community of shared experience.
style has vigour and wit - 'we mortals ... devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner-time ...' This is hardly George Eliot's commentary at its greatest - for that we must turn to her analyses of the major characters - but it does demonstrate the way in which her rich and subtle comprehension extends to the peripheries of her world, illuminating all its diverse characters and their multifarious activities.

In her use of the omniscient viewpoint, George Eliot has made an artistic virtue of a structural necessity. As with Tom Jones or Bleak House, no single character could encompass the broad sweep of the novel's action.\(^{21}\) It is partly this panoramic quality that has provoked comparison with Tolstoy. Though Middlemarch is too restricted in scope to be an English War and Peace, the novel's subtitle, 'A Study of Provincial Life,' is no empty boast. The four major plot strands, delicately interwoven, involve all strata of a provincial world of town and country dwellers.

Among English writers, George Eliot is pre-eminent as the novelist of society. No other novelist shows such deep insight into the dynamics of society, or succeeds so well in its concrete embodiment. Her novels superbly demonstrate the intricate interplay of forces

\(^{21}\) As obvious as it may seem, even this point has been disputed. In a peculiarly wrong-headed article, F. George Steiner writes, 'Could a single point of vantage lead to vistas as abundant as those offered by Middlemarch? Both Flaubert and Proust warrant an affirmative answer. It is Emma Bovary's partial blindness to life which suffuses the provincial scene in so rich a light ...' (Nineteenth-Century Fiction, IX [March 1955], p. 278.) A strange world, indeed, where blindness can enrich the view!
moulding the life of a community, showing just how the wider 'landscape of opinion' interacts with the individuals that comprise it.

The density of social life was an integral part of her artistic vision from the beginning: 'It is the habit of my imagination,' she wrote, 'to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself.' The various cross-currents at work in this medium are finely summarized in a passage of anticipatory commentary:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidarity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder. Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection ... while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning. (97-8)

As a re-reading reveals, almost every phrase is later acted out in the novel's complex narrative. Only the omniscient author could cover such a diversity of 'subtle movement' and yet bind it into unified wholeness.

23 Letters, IV, 97.
Surveying this multifarious collection of people, the omniscient author reveals the inter-relatedness of lives and the essential similarity of human experience which make so ironic man's habitual insensitivity to the needs of his fellows. The finely integrated structure of the novel embodies in an especially direct way George Eliot's distinctive sense of life's unity in diversity. It is built up in an intricate pattern of comparisons and contrasts, a complex network of relationships. As W.J. Harvey says, the reader's powers of psychological and moral discrimination are exercised to the full in the perception of these subtle connections. Some of the connections the omniscient narrator makes explicit. Others are implicit, left buried in the narrative texture of the work, so that the reader goes through a process of expanding awareness. Reading becomes not a passive absorption of a static view of life, but a peculiarly active, stimulating exploration of what the author's stronger 'lens' reveals.

In the broadest sense almost all the characters are linked by their similar areas of concern and experience. Every major character acts out some variation on the common quest for a vocation in life. Lydgate believes his to be the finest profession, finding in medicine the fulfilment of both his intellectual and emotional being; Dorothea and Rosamond seek fulfilment and enlarged experience through

24. The Art of George Eliot; see especially Ch. iii, "Structure III: Architecture."
marriage; Casaubon is oppressed by an encroaching sense of failure in his research; Farebrother, as a churchman, makes the best of a wrong turning, while Fred Vincy seeks to avoid the same mistake; Ladislaw appears the dilettante because, like Fred, he is at a loss over where to apply his talents; Garth, like Lydgate, believes his is the grandest vocation, though neither of them finds their ability given its due recognition and recompense; Mary Garth does not share her mother's enthusiasm for teaching and hopes to avoid it; Bulstrode longs for a fresh beginning, feeling he would then follow his initial inclination to be a missionary; Brooke, having pursued all manner of things in a vague, inconsequential way, seeks to make his mark in public life. Likewise, the great number of marital relationships demonstrate 'that supreme sense of the vastness and variety of human life, under aspects apparently similar' which Henry James recognized as the strength of Middlemarch. 25

Some connections are made by the characters overtly commenting on each other. Lydgate consciously judges Farebrother for his lack of commitment to his calling; Casaubon judges Will Ladislaw for his dilettantism; Ladislaw, in turn, places the futility of Casaubon's scholarship; Mary keeps a critical eye on Fred's struggle to find a career and self-disciplined maturity. But more important are the ways characters unconsciously comment on each other by their actions.

There is the way in which the differences of attitude and practice among men of the one profession reflect upon each other. An important part of Lydgate's definition takes place against the background of his fellow (and rival) medical practitioners. Farebrother, despite his weakness for gambling, is shown to be a much better pastor than Tyke, the rigid Evangelical, or the lazily good-natured Cadwallader. These are some of the more obvious means by which the novel attains 'unity through analogy,' not that George Eliot is particularly interested in aesthetic unity as an end in itself; rather the complex wholeness of the novel is intended to reflect the complex unity of life.

But the narrator's vision in Middlemarch leads to much finer discriminations than these. The omniscient point of view includes access to all the characters' minds and also comment from a position above the characters. Both these aspects considerably refine the judgements made on characters through comparison and contrast. Inside views of characters at times reveal the most unexpected similarities. For instance, we find that the altruistic Dorothea and the egoistic Rosamond are startlingly alike in their motives for

26 It is indicative of George Eliot's sharp insight economically extended to quite minor characters that we see how clearly the good nature depends upon the laziness. One of the finest lines in the book is his wry refusal to see any harm in Casaubon: "It is a very good quality in a man to have a trout-stream" (69).

27 See "Notes on Form in Art (1868)," in Essays, pp. 431-6, where George Eliot outlines her notion of organic form, seeing the 'highest Form' as 'the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena.' Obviously with such a concept of form George Eliot cannot see art as something quite discrete and apart from life. For a useful discussion of her theory, see Darrel Hansell Jr., "George Eliot's Conception of 'Form,'" in George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. George R. Creeger (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp. 66-78.
marrying. Each sees her husband-to-be primarily as a means to an end, as a way of escape from the choking narrowness of her situation. True, Dorothea's attitude is more idealistic - she desires a husband who will provide her with knowledge and the means 'To make her life greatly effective' (24), whereas Rosamond sees Lydgate as a means of attaining superior social status - yet both are egocentrically blind to their husbands as they are in themselves. Of course, Dorothea's consequent growth to a sympathetic awareness of her husband's needs sets her off from the static and impregnable egoism of Rosamond. Later in the novel, the difference between them is neatly captured in a delicate verbal echo. Lydgate, having just recalled the earnest solicitude of Dorothea's "think what I can do" when told of her husband's illness, is met in his own troubles by the 'silvery neutrality' of Rosamond's "What can I do, Tertius?" (633, 635).

Here Lydgate's experience serves as the synthesizing element. Usually, however, the narrator's omniscient commentary is needed to clarify the bearing one character has upon another. Mr. Brooke's gloriously miscellaneous collection of 'documents' plus his constant desire and complete inability to arrange them in some order lightly parodies the scholarly Casaubon's volumes of notes out of which he is unable to carve his "Key to all Mythologies." Brooke's light-headed prattle about his various pet projects also bears ironically on Casaubon's situation. He tells Casaubon: "I overdid it at one time ... about topography, ruins, temples - I thought I had a clue, but I saw it would carry me too far, and nothing might have come of
it" (294). The outcome is equally void, though much more seriously so, in Casaubon's case. The reader has been led into making such cross-references by the narrator's initial contrast: 'the balanced sing-song neatness of [Mr Casaubon's] speech ... was the more conspicuous from its contrast with good Mr Brooke's scrappy slovenliness' (12-13). Similarly, we are alerted to the crucial differences between Casaubon and Will Ladislaw:

Mr Casaubon was less happy than usual, and this perhaps made him look all the dimmer and more faded; else, the effect might easily have been produced by the contrast of his young cousin's appearance. The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness .... When he turned his head quickly his hair seemed to shake out light, and some persons thought they saw decided genius in this coruscation. Mr Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless. (223)

Other explicit contrasts include those of Casaubon and Lydgate (Ch. xi); Dorothea and Rosamond (Chs. xi and xliii); Mary Garth and Rosamond (Ch. xii).28

The key quality of these comments is that they aid the reader's own powers of discrimination. They do not form a definitive statement of character relationships but establish the initial link, leaving the reader free to extend the comparison. Sometimes not even the initial link is made. An unrelated comparison is drawn, leaving the reader to discover its application. In contrast to Mrs. Bulstrode's acceptance of her husband after his unmasking, there is, the narrator comments, 'a forsaking which still sits at the same board

28 Note should be taken, too, of the way in which book titles and chapter epigraphs point up correspondences.
and lies on the same couch with the forsaken soul, withering it the more by unloving proximity' (805). The reader attuned to George Eliot's art of correspondences soon sees how this veiled description applies to Rosamond.

Through such subtle handling, the omniscient point of view not only provides indirect comment upon characters but also guides our expectations of things to come. In presenting Lydgate's failure of resolve in face of Rosamond's inflexible self-will, the narrator suggests that the result might have been different if Lydgate had been greater:

We cannot be sure that any natures, however inflexible or peculiar, will resist this effect from a more massive being than their own. They may be taken by storm and for the moment converted, becoming part of the soul which enwraps them in the ardour of its movement. But poor Lydgate had a throbbing pain within him, and his energy had fallen short of its task. (814-5)

This anticipates the greater success of Dorothea, who, in the ardour of her altruism, does take Rosamond by storm and move her to her one brief act of selflessness.

It is indicative of George Eliot's complex realism that in the pattern of comparison and contrast no one character stands in relation to all the others as ethical norm - as do Squire Allworthy in Tom Jones or Mr. Knightley in Emma. It is true that Farebrother and the Garths provide important points of reference, especially for Fred; but their role as norm is strictly limited, since they do not possess the aspiration or imagination of the major characters. The only universally applicable standard in Middlemarch is the narrator.
herself. The omniscient point of view is, then, doubly necessary to the perception of wider, subtler relationships that escape the characters, no matter how wise or intelligent. With George Eliot, the growth to understanding is a process of moral education until the whole book (unlike Casaubon's scholarship) becomes 'luminous with the reflected light of correspondences' (19).

In a more direct way the interconnectedness of human lives is demonstrated through the manipulations of plot. Here we see one of the most important ways in which George Eliot's artistic realism and moralism are linked. For the causally-linked, chronological narrative of Middlemarch is designed to make concrete George Eliot's vision of the way the world moves.²⁹ It is a rational world in which effect follows cause with slow, invincible inevitability, in which the responsibilities of personal choice are emphasized much more than the vagaries of fate. When a coincidence does enter into the plot, the narrator is quick to stress that it is but a tiny part of a larger process. The railway incident is a chance event that leads to Fred's discovery of a vocation, but circumstances and feelings have

²⁹ Very occasionally the narrative does depart from chronological order. In Ch. xix we are given an external view of Dorothea in Rome before being led backwards and inwards to discover the reason for her appearance. In Ch. lxxii suspense is built up by presenting Lydgate (obviously in unknown trouble) largely through the eyes of his rival practitioners and the keener, though inadequate view of Farebrother. Then, in the following chapter, a number of retrospective scenes, interspersed with summary and analysis, explain his situation and the evident deterioration in his relationship with Rosamond. Through such slight derangements of chronological sequence, the author centres our attention upon processes and causes - by first showing effects which arouse our curiosity.
already been prepared to make this discovery possible: 'For the effective accident is but the touch of fire where there is oil and tow; and it always appeared to Fred that the railway brought the needed touch' (598). Contrast might be made with the less realistic world of Bleak House where Dickens uses fantastic coincidence to place the same moral stress on human interconnectedness.

The world of Middlemarch is also one in which seemingly trivial actions have momentous and far-reaching consequences. Again the omniscient point of view is necessary to embrace the wide-ranging effects of individual acts. The will of the old miser, Peter Featherstone, is an interesting example. The will, by disappointing his expectations, brings a personal crisis in Fred Vincy's life—the need to find a vocation becomes pressing. Because Fred is no longer in a favoured position, his father takes a much less lenient view of his failings, and the consequent domestic unpleasantness causes Rosamond to pressure Lydgate into an earlier (and ultimately disastrous) marriage. The Garths, too, are seriously affected since Fred can no longer repay his debt to them. Because the land is given to Rigg instead of Fred, Bulstrode is soon able to purchase it, and this, in turn, leads to Bulstrode's unmasking through Raffles (who, but for Rigg's previous ownership of Stone Court, would not have rediscovered Bulstrode) and to Lydgate's associated downfall. Thus, ironically, the way is paved for Fred to gain Stone Court after all.

Usually the narrator leaves the reader to trace the ramifications
of an action. But, occasionally, the causal links are made explicit:

In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up. The group I am moving towards is at Caleb Garth's breakfast-table ... (427)

Thus the narrator draws our attention to a (humanly) undetectable side-effect of Brooke's decision to enter politics. In order to make a credible stand on the Reform issue he must up-grade his neglected estates – which means he must hire Caleb Garth as his agent. The consequent increase in Caleb's income enables Mary to stay at home instead of becoming a reluctant school teacher, and so opens the way to rivalry between Fred Vincy and Farebrother. Moreover, Caleb is now able to offer Fred the career that helps him to find his identity and prove himself worthy of Mary. So lives are shown to impinge incalculably upon one another. Early in the book we are alerted to the causal pattern:

But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life to another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our un introduced neighbour. (97)

As we read on this statement is felt to be not a distracting obtrusion of the author's personal philosophy into the fictional world but a valid conceptualization of our experience of that world.

IV

From this 'passionate belief in the solidarity of mankind' (664) spring George Eliot's ethical imperatives. But, for all her moral rigour, she is, as we have seen, strongly anti-doctrinal in
bias because

There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men. (664.)

This is the clearest, most-telling expression of the criterion by which George Eliot judges her characters — that is, the extent to which they possess 'the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.' Every word and phrase in this formulation is deliberately weighted. It is a sense of oneness with others, the ability to feel with our fellows, not right opinions or beliefs that make for moral action. Fellow-feeling must be a 'deep-seated habit' or we lose the faculty altogether. Casaubon thinks he can store his emotions like money in a bank, but finds, on engagement to Dorothea, that repression has killed not preserved them. This fellow-feeling must be direct, must involve immediate contact with the emotional lives of others, for theoretic beliefs can lead us to treat our fellows as mere tools — as does Bulstrode. Even the lofty idealism of Dorothea is shown to be egoistic because it disregards the real situation of the people for whom she seeks to act: she is actually disappointed to find the Lowick villagers so well off, since this denies her a philanthropic role. The primary object of fellow-feeling must be the people closest to us rather than the distant unknown needy; and these people must be seen in their unique individuality, not subsumed under the abstraction of 'mankind.'

30 I have since discovered that a not too dissimilar gloss on this passage occurs in John Hagan, "Middlemarch: Narrative Unity in the Story of Dorothea Brooke," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XVI (June 1961), 17-32.
A full appreciation of the unique individuality of those who people the Middlemarch world is possible only through the inside views which omniscience affords.

For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown — known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours' false suppositions. (148)

Such indeed is the fate of Lydgate, and it is only within the narrator's all-embracing purview that we can see what he is in himself and how others, most fatally his wife, are quite ignorant of the real man. But Lydgate is not alone in this. The texture of the novel interweaves a multiplicity of individual viewpoints, each of which is shown to be quite inadequate to a just apprehension of multi-faceted truth. All the protagonists therefore suffer the injustice of insufficient (though not necessarily untrue) judgements. The narrator alone sees everything in its wholeness and stresses the need to look within and without, to consider subjective states and motives as well as actions. The reader is guided to the perception of the wider truth:

Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrance — he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to its final pause. (85)

The dramatised action of the novel perfectly bears out the narrator's contention that 'We are all of us born in moral stupidity,
taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves,' and our consequent need 'to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling - an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects' that others have each 'an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (225). All the characters in the novel are placed according to the degree to which they grow out of their initial egoism. Bulstrode rationalizes his egoism in the form of religious belief and falls victim of his self-deception. Both Casaubon and Rosamond remain trapped in self-absorption, unable to apprehend 'an equivalent centre of self' in another. The Garths and Farebrother represent the opposite static pole; they are resigned to their own insignificance in the scheme of things and seek actively to aid their fellows. These static characters serve as reference points for the unequal progression of Dorothea, Lydgate, Ladislaw, and Fred Vincy.

The ability to conceive an equivalent centre of self outside of oneself is demonstrated par excellence by the narrator - hence her role as moral norm. The less creative reader is, through the omniscient viewpoint, brought to share this vision. But what of the characters (and people in real life) who, of course, cannot have direct access to the consciousness of others? Because such direct observation is impossible, imagination becomes, for George Eliot, an essential moral faculty. Imaginative insight is vital to a true appreciation of the subjective state of others and to a just estimate of the consequences of our actions. Imagination is, then, implicit
in fellow-feeling; that is, feeling with others.

It must be stressed, though, that George Eliot is no romantic. She does not follow Wordsworth and Coleridge in elevating imagination to primary status as that faculty which leads to profoundest truth. For her, imagination must be closely tied to reason and the recognition of objective fact; it can reliably illumine the unknown only when rooted in the fullest possible awareness of the known. Hardy would, no doubt, have agreed with Conrad that 'Liberty of the imagination should be the most precious possession of a novelist.' But, for George Eliot, the artistic and moral (as well as scientific) imagination 'is not mere arbitrariness, but the exercise of disciplined power - combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge' (173).

In the sphere of moral action, imagination depends very much upon experience. Without like experience it is scarcely possible for a character to enter with imaginative feeling into the needs of others. Lydgate has little sympathy for Casaubon's plight, being 'at present too ill acquainted with disaster to enter into the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy except the passionate egoism of the sufferer' (415). This problem is central to Adam Bede, where the strong hero must be brought through suffering to sympathize with the weak. He comes to the conclusion that "it's the same with love and happiness as with sorrow - the more we know of it, the better we can feel what other

people's lives are or might be, and so we shall only be more
tender to 'em, and wishful to help 'em. The more knowledge a
man has the better he'll do's work; and feeling's a sort o' know­
ledge." 32 For the reader of George Eliot, it is the experience
of the novelist's fictional world which serves to extend his cap­
acity for imaginative fellow-feeling.

But the notion of fellow-feeling in George Eliot's world
calls for more rigorous definition. Despite her repeated emphases on 'feeling with,' it seems to me that George Eliot ultimately
only wants us to 'feel for' her characters and others in real life;
that is, to sympathize not empathize with them. A useful dis­
tinction between sympathy and empathy is made by Oscar Cargill, who
sees literature as asking for

the abandonment of self and identification with others. This
we cannot do without empathy. Empathy is not sympathy; it
entails for the term of the engagement a complete surrender
to other personalities; it means sharing to the fullest ex­
tent possible the experience of the author in living with his
creations; sympathy, on the other hand, means the retention
of a degree of self-consciousness, aloofness, condescension. 33

George Eliot wishes us to feel with her characters only to the point
where we can then sympathize with them; 34 once that is achieved, she
wishes to preserve the detachment to judge. Empathy, in George Eliot,

32 Adam Bede, Ch. liii.
33 "The Validity of Literature," College English, XXX (May 1969),
621-2.
34 Cf. Janet's Repentance: 'the only true knowledge of our fellow­
man is that which enables us to feel with him ...' (Ch. X; my italics).
Significantly, George Eliot did not say, 'the only true knowledge of
our fellow-man is that we have in feeling with him.'
is not an end in itself as it is in Hardy. And we always maintain our separateness, our ability to stand back and evaluate. We empathize only to the extent of temporarily suspending judgement; we remain open to a character's experience in order to appreciate his way of looking at things, but we never wholly immerse ourselves, lose our identity in the object of attention. The experience of the characters does not become our own as it does in Tess. In George Eliot we identify only to the extent of seeing what it would be like were we to experience what the characters (for example, Casaubon) are experiencing. But with Tess we lose the sense of independent selfhood, forget ourselves in total absorption with her plight (or rather with Hardy's apprehension of it - the feeling and being we merge with are his). In Hardy, we go through 'feeling with' till we arrive at 'feeling for' in another sense: that is, 'feeling in the stead of,' or 'on behalf of.'

The very nature of characterization is here closely bound up with our response. The simplicity of Tess's feelings and of her fate aid our involvement; whereas the subtlety of George Eliot's insights makes distinctions - that is, not just refines our sense of character, but enhances too our sense of how we (reader and character) agree - and differ. Here too the sensuous immediacy of Hardy's world is decisive; it acts on our senses in a much stronger more direct way

35 Cf. Hardy's comment to Blathwayt, "I draw no inferences, I don't even feel them" (Thomas Hardy and His Readers, p. 96).

36 Cf. W.J. Harvey's comment that George Eliot's 'fictional micro-cosm' is a world 'designed for our contemplation, not for our imaginative participation' (The Art of George Eliot, p. 79).
than George Eliot's - her world appeals more to the intellect. Finally, it is only because Hardy has such empathy with Tess that the reader, too, can empathize with her. We are relieved to escape (however narrowly) complete identification with George Eliot's characters, not because they are repulsive, but because we want to elude the author's stringent judgement.

It becomes apparent, then, that George Eliot's moral criterion of fellow-feeling, since it is not an end in itself, is inseparable from the quality of action it inspires. The question now arises as to the author's success in applying this criterion of judgement to individual characters in Middlemarch. Arnold Kettle, in his essay on the novel, makes the interesting assertion that 'her standards of right and wrong ... are not quite adequate to the complexity of her social vision.' Now this, as we saw, was just the problem in The Mill on the Floss with the judgement of Maggie's renunciation of Stephen: George Eliot had created such a tangled dramatic situation that the previously clear-cut opposition between the desires of self and the needs of others was no longer applicable. But such a criticism, it seems to me, is not valid for Middlemarch. Much of the book's great distinction lies in the justness and subtlety of authorial judgements, in the admirably maintained balance of irony and sympathy.

In comparison with _The Mill on the Floss_, the novel demonstrates a more mature moral outlook in at least two important ways. Firstly, the characters are consistently judged on the basis of their actions; right feeling is no longer enough in itself. Whereas Maggie's impulsive renunciation of Stephen is seen as good because inspired by noble motives despite the fact that it does no one any good, Dorothea's spontaneous trust in Lydgate is shown to be better than Farebrother's 'cautious weighing of consequences' (787) precisely because it enables her to help Lydgate. Throughout _Middlemarch_ the same standard applies. Fred Vincy, in his relations with the Garths, discovers it is not enough to be well-meaning, that the actual impact of one's deeds on others must be considered. Bulstrode is a frightening study of how pious motives can lead to most unholy actions. Lydgate has truly noble aims but is judged for his failure to realize them, though he is only partially to blame for his downfall.

Secondly, in _Middlemarch_ George Eliot has got beyond the idealization of renunciation as a good in itself. Will Ladislaw's belief that "The best piety is to enjoy - when you can" is not rejected (as is Philip Wakem's similar outlook in _The Mill on the Floss_), but is recognized as a partial truth, the realization of which forms an important part (along with the vision of others as they are in themselves) in Dorothea's growth to maturity. It is a necessary corrective to Dorothea's youthful "fanaticism of sympathy" (234) which, while noble in its idealism, has not yet come to terms with human limitations.

The greater complexity of the social vision of _Middlemarch_ calls
for a refined critical intelligence, and George Eliot is now more than adequate to the task. Consider her comment on Lydgate's expensive gift of jewels to Rosamond:

Opinions may be divided as to his wisdom in making this present: some may think that it was a graceful attention to be expected from a man like Lydgate, and that the fault of any troublesome consequences lay in the pinched narrowness of provincial life at that time, which offered no conveniences for professional people whose fortune was not proportioned to their tastes; also, in Lydgate's ridiculous fastidiousness about asking his friends for money. (430-1)

A recent critic sees an 'ambiguity of moral tone' here, particularly when this passage is compared with the view of society implied in the Prelude. But he fails to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate types of 'narrowness' and to see the consistency of George Eliot's irony throughout the passage. The play of tone and attitude is complex, yet perfectly controlled. Only one side of the way in which 'Opinions may be divided' about Lydgate's action is presented, and, since she does not associate herself with this view, we assume the author takes the other side. The opinion presented is regarded ironically. The author's attitude implied here differs from George Eliot's usual view of 'the pinched narrowness of provincial life,' but there is no inconsistency. The deplorable narrowness of provincial life consists in its mental habits, not in its failure to satisfy the material desires of professional people (and here the irony becomes obvious) 'whose fortune was not proportioned to their tastes.' Yet the recognition of a possible alterna-

tive opinion, and the fact that we are reminded of how the genuine narrowness of society has hampered Lydgate in the past, help to extenuate the implicit critical judgement of him. This judgement is then further qualified by the ironic presentation of an unfavourable view of Lydgate's action - some may see his fastidiousness about asking friends for money as 'ridiculous,' but George Eliot obviously approves his proud independence. His financial troubles are thus seen to be the product of his bad and his good qualities (extravagance and a sense of honour), both of which are susceptible to other interpretations (gentility and 'ridiculous fastidiousness') by sentimentalists who would indulgently place the weight of the blame on society.

The most impressive quality in George Eliot's ethical judgements is their magnanimous impartiality in face of conflicting demands for sympathy; her ability to see all sides of complex reality and yet hold it in unified perspective. The author's intellectual grasp, moral sense, and emotional life are superbly synthesized in her response to her own creations. Nowhere is this better seen than in the two central marriage relationships of the book.

It might be thought that if ever George Eliot was to indulge in the uncritical self-identification with Dorothea, which F.R. Leavis claims is the book's weakness, it would be during the trials of her marriage to Casaubon.39 This pitfall is wholly avoided;

39 See The Great Tradition, pp. 86-93. Leavis, it seems to me, fails to take account of Dorothea's growth from youthful illusion to a mature recognition of her own nature and place in the world. He also seriously plays down the critical irony directed at her before her
Casaubon is treated as sympathetically and as much attention given to his sense of the world as to Dorothea's. At times the reader finds himself slipping into that partiality of which Leavis accuses the author, only to be rudely shaken out of it by an abrupt switch in authorial point of view:

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea — but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating grief's which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us. (296)

There follows a brilliant and deeply-sympathetic analysis of Casaubon's state of mind, particularly of his motives for marrying, that ends in this finely-controlled rhetorical plea on his behalf:

For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self — never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted. (299)

marriage, and quite overlooks its continuance (though on a reduced scale owing to Dorothea's growth) after Casaubon's death. For instance, Leavis quotes the first sentence of the following passage but strategically ignores the second: 'The childlike grave-eyed earnestness with which Dorothea said all this was irresistible — blent into an adorable whole with her ready understanding of high experience. (Of lower experience such as plays a great part in the world, poor Mrs Casaubon had a very blurred shortsighted knowledge, little helped by her imagination.)' (824).
The author not only enters fully into Casaubon's view of things, but also brings Dorothea under her impartial judgement for failing to see her husband as an end in himself:

She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently. (213-4)

Even when Will Ladislaw (the one character who, as we shall see, the author does tend to idealize) enters in to complicate the relationship, the same authorial fairness prevails. Casaubon becomes almost paranoiac in his suspicion of his young cousin, yet the narrator recognises the basis for his feeling: 'Poor Mr Casaubon felt (and must not we, being impartial, feel with him a little?) that no man had juster cause for disgust and suspicion than he ' (4.02).

It may be argued that George Eliot shows partiality for Dorothea by letting her 'off the hook' through Casaubon's untimely death. But his death in no way negates the very real suffering that has gone before: Dorothea pays heavily for her 'very childlike ideas about marriage' (4). And it is repeatedly stressed that the memory of the experience will remain with her always.40

The inflexible justice with which the Dorothea-Casaubon marriage is treated is perhaps even more noteworthy in its extension to the Rosamond-Lydgate relationship. Here the author is probably

40 See, for example, p. 346.
more fair than most readers. With Casaubon there is no discrepancy between the author's and the reader's judgement - George Eliot's sympathy and the grounds for it are both convincingly realised. But with Rosamond, F.R. Leavis is surely not alone in catching himself 'from time to time, wanting to break that graceful neck.'\(^{41}\) The difference in response no doubt stems largely from the fact that Rosamond has a much more destructive impact upon Lydgate's life than Casaubon has upon Dorothea's. Furthermore, Casaubon has a real degree of humanity - many of his fears, needs, and ambitions are seen to be common to most of us; but Rosamond is so superficial, so deficient in inner life, such absolute ego that we have very little point of contact with her. (Note how through continued reiteration her blandness develops strong connotations of coldness and blankness). The purity of her egoism makes her invulnerable; Lydgate has no defence against her deadly 'torpedo-contact.' Amoral rather than immoral (or, perhaps, as David Daiches would have it, 'pre-moral'),\(^{42}\) she is much more frightening than any number of melodramatic Dickensian villains. But, despite all this, she is also pitiable because of her stunted humanity. She is herself largely a victim - of conventional education and of society's attitude to women. There is, then, no real discrepancy between what George Eliot shows of Rosamond and how she

\(^{41}\) *The Great Tradition*, p. 81.

\(^{42}\) *Op.cit.*, p. 27.
judges her. There is a discrepancy between the author's judgment and the reader's, but we recognize that our own view is not impartial - the reader, unlike George Eliot, tends to be biased in Lydgate's favour.

For all her want of humanity, we do not feel (as we do with Hetty Sorrel in Adam Bede) that Rosamond is non-human. The narrator's view reveals how much she is conditioned by her upbringing. In breaking the news of their debt, Lydgate acts unkindly towards her because he is unable 'to imagine fully what this sudden trial was to a young creature who had known nothing but indulgence, and whose dreams had all been of new indulgence, more exactly to her taste' (636). The real tragedy of the marriage is Lydgate's, yet Rosamond's disappointment and complete dependence upon outside events to ward off despair are sympathetically portrayed. Her despondency is movingly captured in the picture of her listless movement through habitual activities:

she arranged all objects around her with the same nicety as ever, only with more slowness - or sat down to the piano, meaning to play, and then desisting, yet lingering on the music-stool with her white fingers suspended on the wooden front, and looking before her in dreamy ennui. Her melancholy had become so marked that Lydgate felt a strange timidity before it, as a perpetual silent reproach, and the strong man, mastered by his keen sensibilities towards this fair, fragile creature whose life he seemed somehow to have bruised, shrank from her look ... (826-7)

Although Lydgate is much the more wronged partner, the author does not side uncritically with his view of the relationship: 'They lived on from day to day with their thoughts still apart, Lydgate going about what work he had in a mood of despair, and Rosamond
feeling, with some justification, that he was behaving cruelly' (815).

The fine balance of judgement shown here is also notable in the treatment of Farebrother and the Garths. Though they embody many of George Eliot's ethical values, these characters are not idealized; they attain a real humanity because their failings are as carefully delineated as their virtues. In fact, it is one of the book's minor triumphs of characterization that we see just how their faults derive from their virtues: Farebrother's generous tolerance leads him to judge himself too softly, and Garth's goodwill and admirable enthusiasm for his work often result in improvident actions for which his family suffers.

Yet, finally, even the author declares her human fallibility within the novel. *Middlemarch* is flawed, though not seriously marred, by the partiality with which she treats Will Ladislaw. The author's fondness appears repeatedly in description: 'Mr Will Ladislaw's sense of the ludicrous lit up his features very agreeably: it was the pure enjoyment of comicality, and had no mixture of sneering and self-exaltation' (81). And again: 'Will Ladislaw's smile was delightful unless you were angry with him beforehand: it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm, and banishing for ever the traces of moodiness' (219). 'The first impression on seeing Will,'

43 One brief lapse of tone occurs in the aside, 'pardon these details for once - you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth' (247).
we are told, 'was one of sunny brightness' (223) and his 'merry smile' was as 'pleasant to see as the breaking of sunshine on the water' (503-4). Through this continual association with sunlight, Ladislaw is idealized, though the function of the imagery is obvious when we read that, for Dorothea, 'the mere chance of seeing Will occasionally was like a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air' (386). Will plays a crucial part in Dorothea's development by bringing freedom and spontaneity of life after the intellectual and emotional sterility of Casaubon. He is also a useful rhetorical device to place Casaubon's lifelessness and futile scholarship. But, as so many readers have felt, this dimension of Will is asserted and not realized; he remains as insubstantial as the sunshine with which he is so often associated.

The indulgent attitude towards Ladislaw contrasts markedly with the author's treatment of the other characters. (Note how often the familiar 'Will' is used, while Lydgate is more distantly referred to by his surname). Criticism of Ladislaw's diletantism is undercut by being voiced by Casaubon. Not only is Casaubon an inadequate judge, but his stilted, pedantic manner, and reference to himself as a standard, further undermine his case (82). The key passage of authorial commentary on Ladislaw's diletantism occurs at the beginning of Chapter X. George Eliot is surprisingly tolerant of his follies and excesses. Phrases like 'await those messages from the universe which summon it to its peculiar work' (83) seem mocking; yet his trial of the various 'attitudes of receptivity' is treated seriously. Again the dry comment, 'the universe had not yet
beckoned,' appears derisory, but there follows a deeply sympathetic discussion of Will's dilemma: 'Even Caesar's fortune at one time was but a grand presentiment. We know what a masquerade all development is, and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos' (34). The comparison with Casaubon, who provides an instance of 'long incubation producing no chick,' is (even though the thought is Will's, not the author's) an obvious ploy to excuse Ladislaw's attitude. What irony is directed at Will is no more than the gentle teasing of the infatuated admirer or the fond parent.

Seemingly stronger irony is directed at Ladislaw's Bohemianism in the exposure of his real motive for returning to England:

It is undeniable that but for the desire to be where Dorothea was, and perhaps the want of knowing what else to do, Will would not at this time have been meditating on the needs of the English people or criticising English statesmanship: he would probably have been rambling in Italy sketching plans for several dramas, trying prose and finding it too jejune, trying verse and finding it too artificial, beginning to copy 'bits' from old pictures, leaving off because they were 'no good,' and observing that, after all, self-culture was the principal point; while in politics he would have been sympathising warmly with liberty and progress in general.(492)

This in itself is quite damning, but it is immediately followed by the comment, 'Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of dilettantism and make us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference.' Obviously, we are to see Will as a dilettante simply because he lacks the opportunity not the inclination to do significant work.
When Ladislaw is subjected to criticism, he is judged more leniently than Lydgate or Fred Vincy. His petulant, almost malicious, destruction of Casaubon's reputation is treated lightly: 'Will was not without his intentions to be always generous, but our tongues are little triggers which have usually been pulled before general intentions can be brought to bear' (390). There is a repeated tendency to soften criticism of Ladislaw by couching it in general terms. Though his motives for visiting Lowick Church (and thus annoying Casaubon), are not exemplary, the author suggests that 'most of us are apt to settle within ourselves that the man who blocks our way is odious, and not to mind causing him a little of the disgust which his personality excites in ourselves' (504). In his unpitying treatment of Rosamond, Ladislaw compares unfavourably with Lydgate, yet his behaviour is excused: 'Let it be forgiven to Will that he had no such movement of pity. He felt no bond beforehand to this woman who had spoiled the ideal treasure of his life, and he held himself blameless' (836). Usually, for George Eliot, common humanity is bond enough.

The partiality for Ladislaw would appear to have a biographical root. Ladislaw strikingly resembles George Eliot's description, in a letter to a friend, of George Henry Lewes: 'He is a person of the readiest, most facile intercourse - thoroughly acquainted with French literature - and of the most varied tastes .... But he is a very airy, bright, versatile creature - not at all a
formidable personage. Perhaps the criticism that Lewes attracted caused George Eliot to be excessively sympathetic to the character who is in some ways his fictional embodiment. For even she had been inclined at first to judge Lewes too harshly: 'Like a few other people in the world,' she later wrote, 'he is much better than he seems — ... a man of heart and conscience wearing a mask of flippancy.'

The personal pressure is probably most strongly felt in Ladislaw's relationship with Dorothea. The heavy stress on the ideal, sexless nature of their love is more than the usual concession to Victorian conventions. Quite possibly it reflects the way the author wished her readers to see her unlawful union with Lewes. It is here that the portrait of Dorothea is weakened. The problem is not, as F.R. Leavis contends, that George Eliot's evaluation of Dorothea is identical with Will's; but the idealization of Ladislaw is to some extent reflexive. What gives Will his special value in George Eliot's eyes is that he alone understands Dorothea and appreciates her worth. In this he is superior to Lydgate, who is initially blind to her true quality. In idealizing Will's feeling, the author tends to idealize the object of his feeling:

For effective magic is transcendent nature; and who shall measure the subtlety of those touches which convey the quality of soul as well as body, and make a man's passion for one woman differ from his passion for another as joy in the morning light.

44 Letters, III, 231.
45 Letters, II, 98.
over valley and river and white mountain-top differs from joy among Chinese lanterns and glass panels? (415)

Ladislaw further complicates the judgement of Dorothea, since marriage to so insubstantial a character calls in question the maturity to which she has so painfully grown through her experience with Casaubon and the Lydgate. It seems to me quite wrong to suggest, as some critics have, that the inadequacy of Ladislaw is part of George Eliot's conscious vision, and that Dorothea therefore undergoes no real development in the course of the novel. 46

Certainly the Finale indicates that marriage to Ladislaw is not an ideal fulfilment for Dorothea, but this is seen to be because of the limitations of marriage itself, not of her husband. George Eliot's intention seems similar to that in The Mill on the Floss - Ladislaw, like Stephen Guest, is to be seen as maturing through his love for a noble woman until he becomes worthy of her. This pattern is successfully borne out in the minor key of the Fred Vincy-Mary Garth relationship; but such a change in Ladislaw is not convincingly realized. The vision in the Finale of his later life as an 'ardent public man' is vague and sketchy as opposed to the particularity and fullness with which the later lives of Fred and Mary, Lydgate and Rosamund are imagined.

The failure of Ladislaw, and the way in which this reflects on

46 See, for example, Joan Bennett, pp. 175-6, and S.R. Jane Marie Luecke, "Ladislaw and the Middlemarch Vision," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XIX (June 1964), 55-64.
the presentation of Dorothea, does not, however, deny the immense stature of Middlemarch. To a rich, concrete social panorama, George Eliot applies a mature and consistent pattern of judgement. Here, as not in The Mill on the Floss, her standards of judgement prove thoroughly adequate to the complexity of her created world. Individual lives and everyday events attain sharp definition and universal resonance in the author's sure perspective. Judgement and rhetoric, vision and technique are superbly attuned. Among George Eliot's novels, Middlemarch is supremely successful in the realization of her artistic aims - the imaginative enlargement of the reader's experience and the extension of his sympathies.
8. CONCLUSION

Though all the four novels that have been examined in detail are indubitably major works, there is with both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy a marked contrast between the seriously flawed early work (The Mill on the Floss, The Return of the Native) and the much more successful, though imperfect, later masterpiece (Middlemarch, Tess of the d'Urbervilles). Yet in each of the novels, instances have been found where the author's judgement is not fully supported by what he has shown. There is in each an area of discordance, a disharmony between assessment and presentation. The seriousness of this disharmony varies greatly from novel to novel, and some comparative judgements must be made of the nature and sources of the failures.

As was noted earlier, the omniscient mode of narration has come under attack of late on grounds of inherent defect; the implied author in nineteenth-century novels (so the argument runs) usually does not know what he is talking about when he judges his characters. But in George Eliot and Thomas Hardy inadequacy of judgement stems not from faulty narrative technique but from confused or inadequate authorial values.

All four novels fail when the omniscient narrator succumbs to a subjective evaluation of experience, allowing a character to define (wholly or partially) the standards by which he or she is to be judged. This might seem to indicate a general tendency for the omniscient viewpoint to be seduced by the subjective, for the narrator to sympathize
uncritically with the protagonist's view of the world. In fact, the danger is much less than in limited, first-person narratives. The omniscient point of view has an inherent balance, an objectivity of perspective whereby it scrupulously preserves those factors that the narrator, in his identification with a character (or characters), is apparently ignoring. Thus, despite Hardy's overwhelming sympathy for his heroines, Eustacia's cruel selfishness, tawdry imagination, and undignified dependence on Wildeve, and Tess's passivity before Alec and other of her difficulties clearly emerge as parts of the total portraits. The self-destructive element in Maggie's renunciation and the inadequacy of Ladislaw are palpably obvious to the reader, despite George Eliot's identification with these characters. Had we been totally immersed in the respective characters' points of view, the authors' loss of perspective would not have been nearly so apparent, though just as real.

The omniscient point of view also ensures greater fairness in the presentation of characters because they are all seen from the one independent vantage point. Of course, as Hardy himself recog-

1 But for the fact that Maggie is so obviously following instinct rather than reason, it could be argued that The Mill on the Floss goes to the other extreme and presents too objective a standard of judgement - that is, with all the emphasis on the needs of others, and self-fulfilment slighted.

2 Of course, at a deeper level the omniscient point of view preserves the sense of objective reality - by affirming as objectively 'there' what lies outside a character. In seeking to expunge all traces of the controlling author, much twentieth-century fiction has tended to become trapped in the unverifiable subjectivity of the protagonist.
nized, no novel or play can be fully just to everyone in it. Concentration of attention upon one character will inevitably prejudice our view of others, despite the legitimacy of their claims in an impartial estimate. (Consider how drastically our appreciation of much comedy would alter if we were given an inside view of the butt man). But it is interesting that, in The Return of the Native and The Mill on the Floss, though Hardy and George Eliot are extremely partial, the omniscient viewpoint carries an inherent counter-check. The omniscient view of Thomasin, Charley, Mrs. Yeobright, and Clym qualifies our sympathetic response to Eustacia by disclosing their counter-claims and the way in which her actions cause them suffering. In The Mill on the Floss the objective presentation of Stephen's argument against renunciation strongly modifies our judgement of Maggie. Tess of the d'Urbervilles demonstrates how concentration on one character may be both detrimental and advantageous to the reputation of another. Our intense sympathy for Tess leads us to condemn Angel when he hurts her. However, our respect for Tess then tempers our judgement of Angel because she remains devoted to him and refuses herself to condemn him. If we are to reject Angel completely, we must regard Tess as either weakly infatuated or foolishly misguided - something most readers cannot do. To maintain the degree of sympathy

3 See Tess, p.11: 'In a true view, perhaps, there was more to be gathered and told of each anxious and experienced one, to whom the years were drawing nigh when she should say, "I have no pleasure in them," than of her juvenile comrades. But let the elder be passed over here for those under whose bodices the life throbbed quick and warm.'
for Tess that he desires, Hardy must show Angel as a worthy partner and one with whom she might have achieved fulfilment and happiness. Angel would have been judged much more harshly by the reader had he been seen only through Tess's uncomprehending vision. The narrator's explanations, albeit cursory, make his deeds understandable, if not excusable.

However, in commending the built-in objectivity of the omniscient viewpoint, I might seem to have merely reinforced Paris's criticism of its inherent confusion. Omniscience in *The Return of the Native* and *The Mill on the Floss*, in particular, reveal strong internal tensions. In each case authorial judgements are inadequate to the complexity of the dramatic situation; they cannot cope with the conflicting demands of the various characters. Yet resolution of the conflicts does not depend upon a change in narrative technique.

First-person narration might, it is true, have resolved the tension in *The Return of the Native* by obscuring Eustacia's shortcomings; as Wayne Booth points out, 'a prolonged intimate view of a character works against our capacity for judgement.' But if all of *The Return of the Native* were told from Eustacia's point of view, while we might sympathise more fully with her, we would lose the book's rich, detached perspective on the irony of events, since the narrator alone can show how good intentions are twisted by fate and how close the

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4 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 322.
characters often are to happiness unawares. What is at fault in the novel is not the technique but the authorial values that lead to a confused pattern of judgement.

It would seem that Hardy could not write a successful pathetic tragedy with a protagonist like Eustacia. He is eminently successful in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* because Tess is such a worthy character, meriting our sympathy but not her fate. *The Return of the Native* fails to be such a moving work of pathos because there is not such tension between our sense of the characters' necessary doom and our sympathy for them. To a large extent our sympathy depends upon the doom and the way in which it is brought about. It would be difficult to feel much for Eustacia content in the gay frivolity of the Parisian beau monde. The greater success of *Tess* to a large extent stems simply from Tess's more attractive character, which easily elicits a sympathetic response despite her failings. As Irving Howe says,

Tess demands nothing that can be regarded as the consequence of deracination or an overwrought will; she is not gratuitously restless or neurotically bored; she is spontaneously committed to the most fundamental needs of human existence. Indeed, she provides a standard of what is right and essential for human beings to demand from life.

Despite Tess's outrage of Victorian conventions, Eustacia really offers Hardy a much more difficult rhetorical problem, because she is 'gratuitously restless' and 'neurotically bored,' because to a great extent her demands are the product of deracination and an overwrought

5 *Thomas Hardy*, p. 111.
Tess of the d'Urbervilles has been criticized for failing to show clearly on each occasion why Tess must succumb to Alec. This, however, is a failure not in Hardy's technique but in its application. When the critical point in the narrative is reached, he cuts and the necessary motivation is obscured. There is no reason to believe that, had he resisted contemporary pressures to gloss over sexual experience, he could not have presented convincing motivation for Tess's actions.

In The Mill on the Floss George Eliot's narrative technique is beautifully adequate, indeed essential, to a controlled perspective on Maggie early in the book. The failure at the end is not the product of this technique but of the author's identification with her heroine. George Eliot's characteristic, balanced assessment is swept aside in a flood of uncritical involvement in 'poor Maggie's' plight. If George Eliot had adhered to the guideline for moral action upheld in Middlemarch - an objective appreciation, informed by fellow-feeling, of the needs of others - she would have had a standard by which she (and Maggie) would have coped adequately with the extremely complex dilemma of the Maggie-Philip, Stephen-Lucy foursome.

Despite the failure of the ending, The Mill on the Floss demonstrates in another relationship - that of Maggie and her brother Tom - the admirable balance that characterizes George Eliot's handling of omniscience in her master-work, Middlemarch. The reviewer for MacMillan's Magazine objected to what he considered George Eliot's
favouritism for Maggie over Tom. George Eliot replied that it was in fact her respect for Tom which had infused the reader, and that 'the exhibition of the right on both sides' was the very soul of her intention. That intention, it seems to me, is faithfully carried out. Take, for instance, this passage describing Maggie's new-found renunciation:

she often strove after too high a flight and came down with her poor little half-fledged wings dabbled in the mud. For example, she not only determined to work at plain sewing, that she might contribute something towards the fund in the tin box, but she went, in the first instance, in her zeal for self-mortification, to ask for it½ linen-shop in St. Ogg's, instead of getting it in a more quiet and indirect way; and could see nothing but what was entirely wrong and unkind, nay, persecuting, in Tom's reproof of her for this unnecessary act. "I don't like my sister to do such things," said Tom; "I'll take care that the debts are paid without your lowering yourself in that way." Surely there was some tenderness and bravery mingled with the worldliness and self-assertion of that little speech; but Maggie held it as dross, overlooking the grains of gold, and took Tom's rebuke as one of her outward crosses. (273-4)

The author might well have identified wholly with her heroine, seeing all that opposed her wishes as harsh and unjust. Instead she sees the streak of altruism in Tom's egoism, and points out the self-righteousness in Maggie's self-renunciation.

In the course of the plot, Tom is allowed his moment of triumph (in the repayment of his father's debts), and Maggie is forced at this point to acknowledge his worth. Furthermore, despite his insensitiv-
which even Maggie must later recognize:

"At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong."

There was a terrible cutting truth in Tom's words - that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative, unsympathetic minds. (370)

The omniscient inner views of 'Our good upright Tom Tulliver's mind'

reflect this fine balance between sympathy and judgement:

But to minds strongly marked by the positive and negative qualities that create severity - strength of will, conscious rectitude of purpose, narrowness of imagination and intellect, great power of self-control, and a disposition to exert control over others - prejudices come as the natural food of tendencies which can get no sustenance out of that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth. (430)

In an odd way, George Eliot's very identification with Maggie makes her sympathetic to Tom, since Maggie herself is so deeply attached to him and dependent upon his love. It is as though George Eliot were presenting, through Maggie, her own case and plea for acceptance to her brother Isaac, who rejected her after her union with Lewes; but she could hope to win him over only by being thoroughly just to his side of their relationship (as represented in Tom).

Here lies an essential difference between George Eliot and Hardy. Hardy's concentration on a central figure causes him to do less than justice to the secondary figures, whereas George Eliot is scrupulously just to all characters (except for her over-indulgent treatment of

8 Note how the growth of Maggie herself is reflected in this. She has Tom in better perspective now than she did earlier when she rejected his words entirely. Now she sees both the justice and the inadequacy of Tom's criticism.
Stephen Guest, Will Ladislaw, and, latterly, of Maggie), even when the pressure not to be is very strong, as in the Tom-Maggie or Dorothea-Casaubon relationships. The imbalance in Hardy is often despite his intentions. Heilman probably sees Alec and Angel pretty much as Hardy wished us to, but not as the book lets us see them. The enormous compassion with which the portrait of Tess is weighted tells heavily against those characters that hurt her, and all actions and people tend to be judged as they impinge upon her. Most readers probably judge Angel, in particular, more severely than the author intended. Hardy was unable to strike quite the balance he wanted in relation to Angel because of his concern that we do not condemn Tess. Because Hardy worked so hard to excuse Tess's failure to disclose her past, we cannot accept Angel's harsh judgement of her concealment. We forget that Tess's prolonged and agonized struggles of conscience and the strength of her impulse towards confession have not been witnessed by Angel; or rather we feel that her goodness is so palpable as to make his grievous misjudgement inexcusable. And the way in which Hardy encourages this view (especially in his comment on Tess as the embodiment of 'Apostolic Charity' [202]) reveals, perhaps, the essential incompatibility of his rhetorical aims at this point in the Angel-Tess relationship. In any case, the result is that Hardy draws a more intense, though less balanced, response than George Eliot. If George Eliot had written Tess of the d'Urbervilles, more justice would probably have been done to Alec and Angel, but the corresponding weakening of sympathy for Tess would have resulted in a much less moving book.
This difference in judgement springs inevitably from a difference in authorial values. George Eliot has a surer basis than Hardy for the judgement of her fictional characters because her morality rests upon a more objective outlook – the recognition of others as separate autonomous beings, as 'equivalent centres of self' with like feelings and desires as ourselves. The selfish dictates of the heart must be overcome and the needs of others put first in our living. Hardy, desiring everybody to be happy, judges those who cause others pain, but is obviously placed in a dilemma when the needs or desires of his sympathetic characters conflict (as in the case of Eustacia and Thomasin, or Eustacia and Clym). An additional reason for the greater success of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, as opposed to The Return of the Native, is that there is not the same degree of conflict in worthy characters competing for the reader's sympathy. The fact that the balance of sympathy between Tess and Angel is almost wholly weighted on Tess's side preserves the pathos and does not seriously weaken the book. But in the Clym-Eustacia relationship the conflict is irreconcilable; both characters must be judged for entering into an obviously incompatible union. And, since they are seen to be responsible for their unhappiness, the simple pathos Hardy strove for is destroyed. In his later fiction, Hardy adopts an increasingly subjective standard of judgement; that is, actions and events are seen largely from the perspective of the central character, and judged predominantly on the basis of their impact upon that character. The desires of his protagonists become so importunate that he acquiesces in their quest for satisfaction.
even (as in the case of Eustacia) when they seek it at the expense of others. Altruistic standards of judgement predominate in Hardy's most important novel before The Return of the Native, Far from the Madding Crowd; but as his tragic outlook darkens, he is so overcome with indignation at the injustice of man's lot and pity for the individual that he cannot disengage himself for long and detachedly consider the good of the community.

George Eliot's values prove wholly adequate to the complexity of her social vision in Middlemarch. She fails with Ladislaw only because she does not apply the same standards to him as rigorously as she does to the other characters. In The Mill on the Floss the failure of the ending stems from a distortion of George Eliot's usual standard: self-denial is uncritically idealized as a good in itself and separated from a just consideration of the needs of others.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles succeeds wonderfully because Tess for the most part justifies Hardy's one-sided emphasis. However, in The Return of the Native Hardy's technique betrays the inadequacy of his values. The subjectivism of his moral outlook ill-assorts with the relative objectivity of the omniscient point of view. The seductiveness of the subjective viewpoint in eliciting sympathy for the most vicious characters is obvious in much modern fiction. If The Return of the Native had been written from Eustacia's point of view we probably could not have resisted her, but, as we have seen, this would have meant the loss of some of the most distinctive qualities of Hardy's fiction. The omniscient point of view brings to our
attention the conflicting claims of other characters and sheds a critical light on Eustacia's actions. The result is unresolved tension between authorial assessment and dramatized action. Moreover, there is inherent conflict in the book's pattern of judgement because Hardy himself remains ambivalent in his response to his heroine.

Failure to apply adequate standards of judgement can lead to another sort of confusion within the work. When an author uncritically identifies with a character he often tends to falsify his essential vision of the conditions of life in order to elicit a favourable response to that character. That is, the author's rhetorical and mimetic aims clash. With Tess there is an internal contradiction in the book's view of nature because at two or three places Hardy uses nature as a moral norm (for the sake of a sharp rhetorical point about society's judgement of Tess), whereas his characteristic emphasis is on nature's indifference to man. However, the inconsistencies are minor, and Hardy's case for Tess is not dependent upon them.

It is indicative of the more serious failure of The Mill on the Floss that George Eliot's case for Maggie is dependent upon a quite uncharacteristic notion of recoverable happiness. One of the strongest strains throughout George Eliot's fiction is the uncompromising view that men reap whatsoever they sow, that, while virtue must often be its own reward, wrong-doing inevitably brings misery in the lives of the doer and those around him. Yet in order to persuade us that Maggie has made the right decision in returning to St. Ogg's, the
author is forced to assert that Lucy and Stephen can (and do) somehow put the pieces together again and achieve a happy union despite shattered illusions. The very tentativeness with which this conclusion is put suggests that George Eliot was conscious of its palpable falsity. It is part of the greater maturity of *Middlemarch* that it does not succumb to distorting pressures in this way.

Though Dorothea is ultimately freed by Casaubon's death, she does have to bear the consequences of her misguided marriage; there is no hollow pretence that a wrong choice can be redeemed without suffering.

Perhaps the most continuous disharmony between rhetorical and mimetic impulses exists in *The Return of the Native*. Here Hardy's excessive sympathy for his characters causes him to make chance and circumstance, not the characters' flaws, responsible for their fates, so producing a seemingly malignant world that contradicts the view of nature (as indifferent and impartial) conveyed through imagery and generalized commentary. Moreover, despite this distortion, Hardy's rhetorical problem is not fully overcome since we remain painfully aware of the characters' faults even though the intervention of chance short-circuits their inevitable course to disaster. To place the

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9 Tess, too, is prey to unfortunate coincidences, but these are not incredibly numerous, nor are they crucial to her fate — social conventions and human imperfections are at least as much to blame as chance. As for the problem of *The Return of the Native*, it might be conceded that at an unconscious level Hardy does believe the world to be malign — as J.I.M. Stewart argues (see Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography, pp. 40-1, 112-4). Be that as it may, it remains true that the excessive use of chance for rhetorical purposes produces a conflict in the book's conscious attitudes.
blame on the universe is to ignore what has been revealed of human culpability.

In order to support his thesis that there is a positive relationship between character judgements and the novelist's beliefs, Sheldon Sacks rules out 'the possibility that any particular local value judgment will be exclusively dictated by the artistic end of the work, though all such judgments must help to accomplish that end. The artistic end of his work exerts no pressure on a writer to make insincere judgments.' However, all these instances indicate that at times the rhetorical or artistic ends of a work do force the author to make insincere judgements, to evaluate in a way incompatible with his considered beliefs.

Though Hardy's values at times prove inadequate to the complexities of his fictional world, one must not therefore imitate T.S. Eliot and dismiss the whole character of his art. One can admire George Eliot's moral stringency and applaud her in the terms of V.S. Pritchett: 'George Eliot's pity flows from her moral sense, from the very seat of justice, and not from a sentimental heart.' This is just praise, but it would be quite unjust to suggest the converse is that Hardy's pity flows only from a sentimental heart. At times he is sentimental (as in his uncritical identification with Eustacia), but only at times. The point that must be kept steadily in view is

10 Fiction and the Shape of Belief, p. 250.
that, while Hardy judges less severely than George Eliot, his softer judgements stem not from a deficient moral sense but from the intensity of his compassionate feeling. The individual reader may possibly feel that this strong feeling betrays Hardy into moral slackness and prefer the greater stringency of George Eliot, but it must be recognized that the lack of moral rigour is the result not the cause of Hardy's view of life. That is, his acute awareness of suffering and his fatalistic estimate of human possibilities lead him to regard judgement as largely irrelevant.

In a bigoted, splenetic attack, T.S.Eliot wrote of Hardy:

The work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhamp- ered by any ideas, or even by what sometimes acts as a partial restraint upon inferior writers, the desire to please a large public. He seems to me to have written as nearly for the sake of "self-expression" as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or edifying matter of communication. 12

Stressing as he is the value of tradition and orthodoxy, Eliot is obviously as much upset by the philosophy as by the man implied in the works. And, no doubt, aspects of Hardy's conscious philosophy are depressing and unedifying; but it is only the crudest criticism that would reduce a novel's vision of life to a few dull concepts. As for the man, the implied author of Hardy's novels, it seems to me that he is a particularly wholesome and edifying matter of communication. And this despite (sometimes even partly because of) his love

of the strange and macabre that Eliot finds so objectionable (what Eliot sees as 'diabolic' most readers would term simply 'gothic').

The distinctive quality of Hardy's voice that pervades all his novels and rises from them as the transcending spirit of the man living on, is his anguished, imperfectly-resigned grief over the human lot. The novels assert as their major positive the dignity and supreme worth of man; they pay homage to his stoic fortitude, his unconquerable spirit in face of crushing forces arrayed against him. Hardy is ultimately baffled as to why things should be as they are and powerless to make them better; therein lies the deep poignance of his works. The passages of commentary serve not so much to express his conceptual view of life as his emotive attitude; they are lyrical laments on the sufferings of his characters as humanity's representatives. Hardy's vision finally evokes the passionate cry of King Lear, whom personal suffering had taught the supreme irrelevance of judgement in face of man's community in suffering: 'None does offend, none, I say, none.' All have

13 For a thorough defence of Hardy in face of T.S.Eliot's attack, see J.I.M.Stewart, "The Integrity of Hardy," _English Studies_, I (1948), 1-27. See, too, Stewart's book, _Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography_, pp. 37-44. And witness the testimony of Q.D. Leavis, who, though not an admirer of Hardy's art, can yet write: 'We can only be grateful for having a body of fiction that proceeds from so honest, worthy and compassionate a nature, so sensitive to human misery and so powerful to record its distresses at the spectacle of suffering, so disinterested, unworldly and unfailingly tender' ("Hardy and Criticism," _Scrutiny_, XI [Spring, 1943], 236).

14 _King Lear_, IV. vi. 170.
sinned and all suffered, so what man dare judge? Only a just God may judge, and in Hardy's world there is not only no God but the ruling powers, in so far as they are conscious, are even less moral than men. Hence, Hardy, as the only authoritative voice for his world, acts as supreme advocate for his characters, echoing that earlier ruler of the Wessex domain: "I'll able 'em: / Take that of me, my friend, who have the power / To seal th' accuser's lips." 15 It is the misfortune of The Return of the Native that there the accuser's lips are not as well sealed as they are in Tess.

The nature of a writer's character judgements determines the very type of fiction he can write. Because he does not hold his characters truly responsible for their fate, blaming instead the unjust arrangement of the world, Hardy could never write high tragedy. Conversely, George Eliot could never produce Hardyan pathetic tragedy since she does hold her people responsible for their destinies, even when (as in the case of Lydgate) the fate they bring down upon themselves is much worse than they deserve.

There is, though, more to the narrator-character relationship than the question of judgement. One can distinguish between a writer's attitude towards his characters and his tone. George Eliot is usually more detached in attitude towards her creatures than Hardy is to his. 16 Yet George Eliot is more personal and less

15 Ibid., IV. vi. 170-3.
16 Maggie Tulliver is an exception, but then 'only towards the end of The Mill on the Floss.' Early in the book, the author's perspective on her heroine evinces considerable critical detachment.
restrained in tone than Hardy, who conveys his feeling for his characters more through lengthy, loving description and the rhetoric of plot than by direct statement. George Eliot's feeling is more directly expressed - very common is the formula, 'poor Maggie,' 'poor Dorothea,' 'poor Rosamond,' 'poor Lydgate' (though that 'poor' can range in tone from unqualified compassion to heavy irony).

Despite the greater degree of commentary in George Eliot, hers is a more public world than Hardy's since she places less stress on the personal idiosyncrasy of the artist's vision. Comparatively speaking, George Eliot's art is objective in outlook and personal in tone, while Hardy's is subjective in outlook and impersonal in tone.

It is interesting to note how George Eliot's less intense feeling for her characters is revealed in the relative cursoriness of her physical description. An instructive contrast is that between the description of Dorothea in the Vatican (Middlemarch, Ch.xix, p. 201) and the much more fully realized picture of Tess in the harvesting scene (Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Ch. xiv, pp. 74-5). There is point to the comparison in that the two heroines are at equivalent stages in their careers: each, having just become acquainted with suffering, is in a state of shock and disillusionment - Tess after her seduction by d'Urberville, Dorothea after her marriage to Casaubon. The vividness and immediacy with which a character is presented is, of course, a vital factor in influencing judgement. We are much more inclined to overlook Tess's shortcomings than we are Dorothea's, or even Maggie's, because Tess is more strongly
visualized, more fully 'there' in the reader's experience.

Finally, no matter how fully realized or comprehended, it is not the characters in themselves that the reader values most in George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. In both authors (as with most omniscient novelists) it is the character and vision of the implied author that constitutes the richest, most rewarding aspect of the work. Many twentieth-century novels are suffocating and unenlightening because the author has eschewed the 'unreality' of omniscience, and the reader is imprisoned within the consciousness of a sick or limited character. With George Eliot and Thomas Hardy it is the broad, contemplative wisdom, the deep reservoir of experience, embraced by the omniscient author that makes the reading of the novels a liberating, inspiring experience. In the fullness of their humanity they transcend the limitations of their characters and of their own conceptual views. 'The presence of a noble nature,' wrote George Eliot, 'changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses....' Hardy's aim in fiction was, he said, to make 'old incidents and things seem as new.' Through the power of their omniscient vision, both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, at their best, succeed in making us see the world afresh or in new perspective, as though for the first time.

17 The poverty of a recent BBC TV dramatization of Vanity Fair revealed just how much of the interest and life of that book resides in the narrator, the 'showman' of the Fair. Note too, how flat and colourless is Esther Summerson's portion of Bleak House compared with that of the omniscient narrator.

18 Middlemarch, p. 313.
A. Major Texts: Editions Consulted

(Note: the edition listed first in each case is that to which page references have been given).

1. The Return of the Native (1878)

2. Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891)
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