

## CHAPTER I

*Shaping Hardy's Art*  
*Vision, Class, and Sex*

The cruelest man living could not sit at his feast unless he sat blindfold.

Ruskin, *Unto This Last*

In a world where the blind only are cheerful we should all do well to put out our eyes.

Hardy, *The Hand of Ethelberta*

He entered on rational considerations of what a vast gulf lay between that lady and himself, what a troublesome world it was to live in where such divisions could exist, and how painful was the evil when a man of his unequal history was possessed of a keen sensibility.

Hardy, "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress"

## I

In order to appreciate adequately the sort of enchantment that Hardy's art casts over otherwise so dark a world, one has to come to terms with its overt and considered life-denying implications. Critics have long noted the Schopenhauerian aspects of Hardy's fiction, the idea that it would be better not to have been born, which is played out so gruesomely in the suicide of little Father Time in *Jude*. But this is only half the story, for Hardy's Schopenhauerian gloom should be recognized as the consequence of an intense feeling *for* life. Confronting the emotional blankness of a world absolutely indifferent to human consciousness and sensibility, and a world of social restraints that punishes the very animal desires that are the conditions for survival, Hardy implicitly affirms those desires through his extraordinary feeling for the textures of the natural world.

In the stories he tells, the pains Hardy feared dominate the pleasures that might be reaped. His "elemental" resistance to life is the other side of his elemental and extreme passion for it, a sensibility that manifests itself in his pervasive preoccupation with "seeing." He sees what is beautiful but

recognizes as well the innumerable ways in which life does damage to the sensibility that is, ironically, its product. Seeing acutely brings to the attention of readers a world abundant in forms of life that Hardy's protagonists themselves only occasionally glimpse, intent as they are on their loves and lives. The "life" in Hardy's novels – robust, prolific, various – is registered from perspectives that resist the pain acuteness of vision inflicts. The more you know, the more you can be hurt, but the more you know, the more wonderful the world can seem. Hardy's strong feeling for life is most evident in the way his pages at their most powerful are full of vital things not apparently central to the story. While his prose registers the shame and humiliation that social forces, always ready to punish and disgrace, inflict on those below, on those who yield to sexual vitality or who aspire to conditions beyond those into which they were born, it registers as well the vital force that makes so much of the world (dangerously) attractive.

So the texture of Hardy's writing paradoxically affirms the world that it officially denies. Its careful attention to the things of this world implies feelings of attachment, even of love (which leave him particularly vulnerable). His "keen sensibility" generates perceptions, tensions, and contradictions that can be more interesting and more moving than the doom-ridden plots and often heavy philosophizing that are their frequent vehicle. Pleasure in description of the physical world itself is accompanied by anxiety about the dangers of indulging the sensibility that makes the pleasure possible. No longer believing in any but the material world and skeptical about what can be assuredly known there, he dramatizes desire and hides from it in a new aesthetic austerity. Self-discipline keeps one respectable and becomes a condition for survival in a world that crushes the miraculous capacities of seeing, knowing, and feeling that it created. "Seeing" becomes the supreme virtue as it is the supreme danger – it allows one to know without being touched; but it also allows one to know too much.

Lawrence was drawn to Hardy's willingness to engage unconventional vital forces; he was disappointed by Hardy's desperate aspiration to respectability and his unwillingness to take the full risk of that engagement:

[R]emain quite within the convention, and you are good, safe, and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side: or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, willful, you will find the security of the convention a walled prison, you will escape, and you will die ... This is the tragedy ... [:] first [that man] is a member of the community, and must, upon his honour, in no way move to disintegrate

*Shaping Hardy's Art: Vision, Class, and Sex*

3

the community . . . second, that the convention of the community is a prison to his natural, individual desire, a desire that compels him, whether he feel justified or not, to break the bounds of the community, lands him outside the pale. (*P*, p. 411)

In Hardy's novels sensuous responsiveness is constrained by social contingency. His acute powers of observation complicate his attitudes toward the class structures that govern society and the powerful sexual drives that govern human behavior. Seen, if at all, out the corners of the protagonists' eyes, in what I am calling an "understory," nonhuman worlds counterpoint the central preoccupations of his plots – the interplay of class and sex. Everything in Hardy's metaphysically meaningless world is, under keen eyes, charged with meaning and belies the human social organizations and moral conventions that ostensibly contain it. The observer himself is likely being observed. There are no secrets in this world, only the desire to keep them.

The biggest secret is sexuality, which is nevertheless almost always exposed to others' observation. Sexuality is the greatest obstacle to the class aspirations to which Hardy and his Ethelberta aspire. He was thus forced into dramatic self-contradiction, writing of the terrible injustice and unnaturalness of class distinctions and the absurdity of human conventions of respectability against the gorgeous and usually ferocious energies and abundance of life, and at the same time personally struggling to achieve respectability at all costs – usually through evasiveness and disguise (as when he wrote his autobiography under his wife Emma's name). Vision dramatizes the seductiveness of sexuality and nature and at the same time their power to compromise and elude him. It forces him and his characters into self-consciousness. For that reason, his novels are almost invariably narrated by anonymous figures alert both to natural phenomena large and small and to the nuances of social mores. The protagonists are damned by respectability *and* by resistance to it, for convention is not only outside them like a police force. It is inside them like a conscience.

That conscience, however, usually produces not guilt but shame. Where the characters themselves feel guilt, whatever the narrator may be implying, the guilt is unjust and destructive. Sue Bridehead's shuddering return to Phillotson's bed in *Jude the Obscure* is the best and most disturbing image for this very Hardy-esque quality. By and large, however, his characters are not guilty in their transgressions – Tess, for the most famous example, is a "pure woman," although she has been raped and has become a murderess. In effect, Hardy's plots dramatize his own fear of the kinds of transgressions and

ambitions he allows Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – or Eustacia Vye in *Return of the Native*, or even the almost parodic doctor, Fitzpiers, of *The Woodlanders*. Hardy seems ashamed of his own shame, and his novels reflect his ambivalent attitude, in part by focusing so often, with fear and admiration, on those recklessly passionate figures, like Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who intentionally or not risk the respectability that might protect them from the doom that follows upon their desires.

Seeing too intensely, too intensely aware of the consequences of being seen, deeply sympathetic to the outcasts of society (and to the animals and insects that move in and out of the characters' lives), desperate to avoid being himself cast out, passionately in love with the physical world, terrified of its indifference to his passion, Hardy writes his novels in disguise. Their greatest strengths are not in their continuing implicit commentary on social or cosmic issues. Rather, they play out his ambivalence, fusing his powers of vision with his deepest desires and anxieties about social success and sexual union. He risks the limits of convention and in the end – to Lawrence's chagrin – punishes the inevitably flawed protagonists who take that risk.

Hardy was plagued with vision, which invariably reveals much that he did not want to see, in particular his own guilty complicity. With the eye of an architect, a Darwinian, a naturalist, and a novelist, Hardy saw history in objects; he saw how phenomena connect or conflict; he saw life subtly and grandly everywhere; he read society in complexions, patterns of labor in postures, systems of hierarchy in dress. And with the peculiar modern self-consciousness of the late nineteenth century, he wrote in hiding from what he saw, developed strategies of protection, secretly admired what he punished and feared. He hid from and animated with poetic sensibility the dangers of the world that his vision disclosed.

Precise observation links inextricably to questions of class and of sexuality. (I want to emphasize sexuality over gender because the gender and class issues in Hardy seem to develop from direct sexual energy, given as an inevitable natural force that disrupts the narratives.) Class is a determiner of position for both observer and observed; sexual desire provokes intense observation and at the same time constantly threatens the stability of class. That threat seems built into the very texture of Hardy's prose, which, like Jude gazing distantly at "Christminster," often strains against the colloquial in an awkward and self-conscious attempt to prove he belonged among those graduates of Oxford who did not have to write for a living. Such writing, so central to his philosophically burdened narrations of

disaster, John Bayley has described as Hardy “on duty.”<sup>1</sup> Critically, Hardy has always paid the price for this and has been patronized as an “auto-didact.” While Hardy off duty, in touch with the vitality of the living world, is quite another writer, his excessive sensitivity to criticism drives his prose too often, his plots almost always.

Given his implicit rejection of class hierarchies, it is significant that he rarely satirizes them; one does not feel even in *The Hand of Ethelberta* – despite some dissolute and buffoonish aristocrats – the sort of antiaristocratic animus one finds in many of Dickens’ early novels. Ethelberta, the daughter of a butler, though she marries a formerly dissolute aristocrat, does very well among the rich and noble, who are not satirized or, by and large, condemned. Hardy’s attitude toward all these things is further complicated by the fact that he saw writing novels as a way to make a living rather than as an expression of authentic (and entirely respectable) art. Fiction writing is secondary to poetry; such writing is a medium for lying and evasion as well as for representation. It is a salable commodity and constantly subject to misinterpretation and to unintended revelations. One extreme expression of this comes in the figure of the bastard-villain William Dare in *A Laodicean*, who manipulates a photograph to incriminate the innocent protagonist, Somerset. Yet more representative is the way Hardy’s narratives are obsessed with spying, overhearing, gossip. Notoriously, his first published novel, *Desperate Remedies*, written in response to the fact that his first novel, “The Poor Man and the Lady,” was turned down, is manically loaded with spies spying on spies spying on . . . Someone is always watching. One will always be observed and always misunderstood. Hardy is thus fascinated by what happens off stage, where the normal, unlike his narrator and his protagonists, is unselfconscious about itself.

Self-consciousness and seeing are complexly interconnected, each visual event shaped in its significance by the degree to which observed and observer are alert to their conditions. Hardy’s own great powers of observation and natural description suggest why he is so intensely conscious of the pervasiveness of watching and nature’s relentless indifference to what humans see. Seeing does not necessarily empower; it frequently exposes and deceives. Hillis Miller succinctly describes Hardy’s goal as trying “to escape from the dangers of direct involvement in life and to imagine himself in a position where he could safely see life as it is without being seen and could report that seeing . . . [he] sought to protect himself and to play the role of someone who would have unique access to the truth” (*DD*, p. 43).

The image that best embodies this effort is the “window,” for while windows provide an opening between two otherwise alien, distinct, isolated worlds, they also imply incompleteness of connection. One can see through windows, even hear through them, but only rarely – although this too happens in Hardy’s work – can one touch through them or directly affect or resist what appears in the frame. (As a man who hated to be touched, Hardy would likely have found windows the best, if necessarily limited, means of connecting with the other.) The window gives access without requiring immediate engagement, allows seeing without being seen. Like writing, seeing has the paradoxical function of allowing close-ups while implying the absence (or distance) of what is seen and described. But while windows seem to focus the visual world, they often allow in more than the viewer wants, and they cannot entirely contain the multiplicity and dangers of the material world outside. The lives of Hardy’s characters are as frequently disrupted by their own acts of observation as they are by being spied upon. Like much else in Hardy, the framed scene both represents and evades, makes vulnerable and protects, implies and circumvents, approaches contact and resists it.

Hardy’s obsession with detached and distanced observation is also related to the distances established by class; the poor protagonist’s only access to a higher social position is through observation – as Jude observes Christminster, as Tess, undetected, observes Angel’s comfortable clerical family, as the dying Giles Winterborne, in *The Woodlanders*, preserves his beloved Grace from any questioning of her fidelity to her husband by protectively observing her from outside the window. From the first, as in the never published “Poor Man and the Lady,” which seems to have been largely incorporated into the long story “An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress,” Hardy’s novels concentrate thematically on the primary barrier, class, enforced and also threatened by sexuality and ambition. Even *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Fancy and Mr. Maybold) intimates the theme, as does *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Bathsheba and Gabriel), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (Elfrida and Stephen), *Two on a Tower* (Lady Constantine and Swithin), *The Hand of Ethelberta*, *A Laodicean* (Paula Power and Colonel De Stancy, George Somerset), *The Woodlanders* (Giles Winterborne and Grace Melbury), *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (Tess-Angel-Alec). Even where the obstacles to romance are not primarily class-related, as in *Return of the Native* and *Jude the Obscure*, questions of class are pervasive.

Hardy’s Jude-like ambitions make him and his male protagonists susceptible to every seductive Arabella. If the well-beloved Avicé of *The Well-Beloved* is endlessly elusive, Tess Durbeyfield is imagined with

sensuous particularity. Failures of touching in her novel are dramatized as failures to honor Tess's physical nature, even by Tess herself. Writing, the medium itself, protects the narrator from the catastrophes of sexuality and at the same time describes its irresistible attractiveness; it celebrates the physical and its indulgence and at the same time distances the narrator and reader from it.

As antidote, sexual desire requires restraint from touching. But the difficulties of this are suggested – with almost comic extravagance – by the figure of Colonel De Stancy, in *A Laodicean*, who does in effect renounce touching for years, swears off women entirely, and yet is overwhelmed by desire when he is enticed by his bastard son, Dare, to spy through a little hole in the wall (another kind of window) on the lovely but characteristically elusive Paula Power, exercising in her gymnasium. The peeping colonel might be taken for Hardy himself, though Hardy was aware of the absurdity of his own desires and fears. The patterns of frustration combine a strong sense of sexual energy with a romantic fear of consummation. While Cytherea Graye of *Desperate Remedies* is at last united with her lover, she is one of the rare ones in the Hardy canon. The novels depend on the pattern, sometimes almost symmetrical, of pursuit and frustration, and they regularly refuse the climax in comic union that is characteristic of the Victorian novel in general. In *A Laodicean*, the pursuit across Europe, first of Somerset seeking Paula, then of Paula seeking Somerset, is only a more exaggerated form of Hardy's usual frustration plot. Contingencies characteristic of life itself, misunderstandings, misperceptions, accidents of timing, virtually inexplicable hesitations will postpone or ultimately deny lovers their opportunity for consummation.

The examples are everywhere. Elfride Swancourt of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* loses her first tepid love, Stephen Smith, and as Tess is rejected by Angel Clare, she is rejected, by Henry Knight, but then marries a third party whom she doesn't love and dies before her two lovers can resume their pursuits. Christopher Julian, having pursued Ethelberta through the entire novel, fails by moments to stop her marriage to the degenerate Lord Montclere; Lady Constantine dies at the instant that Swithin St. Cleve, in *Two on a Tower*, recovering from the shock of finding her looking old, returns to fulfill his promise to marry her; John Loveday, in *The Trumpet Major*, ultimately loses his love, Anne Garland, to his unstable brother, Bob; Geraldine Allenville, after a novella full of diversions and denials, "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress," flees to her lover, Egbert Mayne, only to die before their relationship can be consummated; Giles

Winterborne of *The Woodlanders* watches over Grace Melbury and dies before she can return to him. Such frustrations climax in Hardy's novelistic career with the stories of Angel and Tess, Jude and Sue. Even when some minor consummations are allowed, Hardy is begrudging, so that the marriage of the endlessly patient Diggory Venn to Thomasin Yeobright in *The Return of the Native* is withdrawn in a revealing footnote in which Hardy encourages the reader to "choose between two endings," of which the "more consistent conclusion" is governed by an "austere artistic code" (Bk 6, ch. 3, p. 464). Consummation not only entails a kind of postcoital lapse from passion and disintegration of desire; it also means the dangerous crossing of class boundaries, social impropriety (with attendant punishment), and the thwarting of professional and social ambition.

The transition from seeing (or writing) to engagement, which may well be provoked by observation, is usually the point of crisis and peripety in Hardy, which is one of the reasons that so many of his stories center on those rare moments when seeing gives way to touching; seeing without touching is frustrating, but the consequences of consummation are catastrophic. Desire and ambition in this world are not quite respectable, but distance is the potential instrument of evasion and disguise.

Recognizing these patterns of defense and, in effect, life-denial, however, should not preclude recognition of Hardy's continuing sympathetic engagement with the recklessness of desire pursued, the very energies that will lead to self-destruction. The abandonment is enormously attractive, even to the anxious narrator who maintains his distance at all times. Many of the novels develop as the consequence of some single "lapse" into passion, ambition, or recklessness, though they may emerge as rather mild in modern terms – Elfride's kiss of Stephen Smith in effect generates the plot of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*; Bathsheba's childish valentine to Boldwood leads to something like tragedy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as does her succumbing to the magnificently conscienceless sexuality of Sergeant Troy; *Two on a Tower* traces Lady Constantine's fall into passion for the young astronomer, Swithin, and the consequences of that fall. Most notoriously, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins with Learlike precipitation as Henchard sells his wife and is thus released into his ambitions: "If I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pounds before I'd done o't" (*MC*, ch. 1, p. 9).

While the pattern Hardy establishes suggests a reading of the world that retains at least some shadow of the moral forms available to writers and their culture in preceding eras, in Hardy failure and defeat after moral trespass do not result from the moral order of the universe: it has no moral

order. Rather they emerge from the conflict between the mindless natural order itself and the extraordinary human powers to see, to understand and feel, to imagine the ideal. They result also in part from the conflict between desire and the arbitrary restraints of social systems. The asymmetry between desire and social order suggests that the rules and language humans use to deal with the world are not intrinsic to that world, but mere human impositions. In such a Lawrentian world, breaking the rules, abandoning constraint is the reverse of evil; in some ways it is the great ideal. But while it is endlessly desirable it is not “respectable.”

While Lawrence is right that Hardy systematically punishes those who break from respectability, it is central to Hardy's achievement that his desire to see without being seen also implies a strong desire to break out of the conventional world to which he feels constrained to submit. It may be the Laodiceans – the lukewarm – who survive in Hardy's world, but it is the Henchards – and even the Sergeant Troys – who win the narratives' deepest engagement. Yet in the long run, the Laodiceans are only a little less likely to suffer disaster than the Henchards. Playing by the rules, as Lawrence's essay insists, is itself life-denying. Moreover, preoccupation with safety and invulnerability rarely means success. One cannot ultimately hide inside the social world that denies desire and vitality. The natural world is not governed by moral Nemesis but by material laws that have no relation to human consciousness except that they may be detected by it. Invulnerability becomes problematic even at moments when the protective distance would seem maximal and is dramatized within the stories themselves in the events and perspectives of the characters. The visual is the formal expression of Hardy's fear of the humiliations of public exposure but also the means that allows him, with the greatest acuity, to register that vital world that he secretly admires and even loves.

The sexuality to which Hardy was reluctantly but inescapably attracted through the simple physical presence of women – who seem in his novels as overwhelmingly attractive as De Stancy found the gymnastic Paula Power – not only threatens social advancement but makes rational control impossible. This real world lies beyond the range of Victorian realism and is ultimately both more important and more powerful than the respectability behind which Hardy regularly hid. Sexuality is the human manifestation of this other, vital, Lawrentian world. More dangerously still, sexuality threatens to break down the strategies of defense by which protagonists seek to keep themselves, like Hardy's narrators, invulnerable. Hardy's dislike of being touched, says Hillis Miller, in his now classic study

of Hardy, is fear of ceasing to be a spectator and of being “brought physically into the world of others,” and thus “vulnerable to their energy and will. He wanted to remain invisible, untouchable, a disembodied presence able to see without being seen or felt” (Miller, 1970, DD, p. 55).

Many of even the most pedestrian of Hardy’s novels contain stunning moments of poetic vision that result from unexpected observations of people or events or natural phenomena. Unsuspectingly observed by acute, surprised, or wary eyes, people and things reveal the secrets of their essential, let us call it “natural,” selves. Tom Paulin points to a Hardy sketch for his poem “In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury,” which superimposes a pair of spectacles on a drawing of the leaze, where the poet in his youth had danced with a lover. It is a surreal image, evocative of Magritte both in the stark incompatibility of the human contrivance with the natural landscape and in the transparency of the spectacles, which allows the leaze to show through. Paulin sensibly emphasizes the “random and gratuitous” relationship between spectacles and landscape and the implicitly “anomalous relationship of man to the outer world which is the object of his knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> But the image is striking in another way: it implies that everything in the world is under silent scrutiny. Nothing in the almost barren landscape of the leaze – material and unconscious as it is – escapes the narrator’s or poet’s eye, and nothing is aware that it is being observed.

The image has an almost paranoid quality: what might be discussed comfortably as an epistemological concern must be understood as a tensely emotional one: somebody is watching and ready to expose you. The function of poet and narrator is to observe, and any image of the most profoundly nonhuman landscape is necessarily infected with the self-consciousness of an observer to which the object remains indifferent. “In making even horizontal and clear inspections,” he wrote in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, “we colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in” (*FMC*, ch. 2, p. 14). In the poem Hardy’s sketch accompanies, the speaker, Jocelyn-like, feels himself to be precisely who he was when he danced many years before with his lover – “I remain what I was then.” The longing for sexuality is there, but an irrepressible self-consciousness detects the “little chisel/Of never-napping Time,” which, when it thinks the poet sleeping, he feels “boring sly within my bones.”<sup>3</sup>

A pair of spectacles is superimposed on all of Hardy’s worlds. It is necessary to be alert to both the world viewed with remarkable insight and precision and the viewer shaping the vision. The world is watching and