A Woman's Story: Tess and the Problem of Voice

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Critical essay

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[essay date 1993] In the following essay, Higonnet interrogates Tess's narrative voice in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, identifying gender codes that Hardy utilizes to define her voice and its relationship to the male characters in the novel.]

What concept of voice is embedded in the telling of a woman's story? Much feminist debate has focused on the issue of whether women writers have a voice of their own. Can a male writer's narrative translate the language of women, a "muted" group, into that of his own "dominant" group?¹ What does it mean for a male narrator to represent a woman's silence? Since the silences and silencing of Tess Durbeyfield have attracted critical controversy, this essay focuses on Hardy's shaping of her voice and story. It identifies gender codes through which Hardy defines Tess's voice and its relationship to those of men. Hardy's project of truthfully representing a woman's language becomes entangled in his concern to dismantle clichés about masculinity and femininity. It also intersects with his critique of stereotypes of class. As he works through the problem of Tess's voice, he turns it into an allegory about the artist's social otherness and an occasion to find a new, more "feminine," poetic voice.

Hardy's devices can help us explore ways of defining voice, a topic subsumed by most theory under narrative voice. Narratology gauges the distance between a narrator and a character's words or thoughts in terms of technical devices, such as free indirect speech.² Linguistics helps us to appreciate an author's (or character's) lexical range, favored rhetorical figures, dialect, or typographically indicated intonations.³ Such technical inquiry, however, has generally avoided the complex topic of the gendering of voice.

Fidelity to a hypothetical character's voice, whether in conversation or in letters, has long been considered a test of artistic excellence by both authors and critics. "One of the tests of quality in a novelist is the skill with which dialogue between characters is presented. In reading dialogue, we feel particularly close to the 'reality' with which the novel is linked."⁴ Having been attacked in early reviews for inserting inappropriate language into his rural characters' mouths, Hardy claimed both his own
fidelity and his authorial right to freedom in representing idiom. Yet readers pointed to a gap in class, or sociolect; modern readers similarly have pointed to a gap in "genderlect."

Because he pays acute attention to traits of "masculinity" or "femininity" in a voice, Hardy's mimetic strategies foreground some of the difficulties embedded in a "masculine" narrative about a female protagonist. At times his narrators assume the authoritative stance of realist fiction that implies an objective, even transparent, transcription of a character's "story" is possible. With very different effect, they also enter into a kind of dialogue with their subjects, which I describe as an "exchange" of voice.

In publishing the first edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman, Faithfully Presented*, [T] Hardy paradoxically justified his "attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things" (T xv). In the tension between art and truth, what is at stake is the fictional suppression of Tess's voice. Silent and cold as a "marble term" while Alec imprints a kiss on her cheek, Tess resists the imprint of men's values and actions. As a woman, she becomes a physical boundary marker set at the margins of sexual maturity, of respectability, and of death. As a "term," she marks the limits of conventional understanding and points to her own unspoken experiences that lie beyond the boundary of the text.

The question of silence and censorship arose immediately upon publication. Hardy contended that his heroine (i.e., he) had been muted by what he calls the "merely vocal formulae of society" (xvii). He "got into hot water," as he put it, for his attempt to give words to Tess's story, encountering first publishers' cuts and then critical outrage.⁵

Can a man implicated in patriarchy speak for a woman constrained by it? Responding to censorship both in the fictional past and in the reception of his book, Hardy claims to present a "faithful" echo of his heroine's elusive voice. His exploration of a woman's voice in *Tess* harks back to traditional realist notions of transparency and looks forward to modern concepts of narrative experiment. The autonomous selfhood and therefore voice of a literary character are never more than useful fictions within the fiction. Narratorial language mediates our illusion of hearing a singular character's voice, as it mediates our perception of a singular narrative voice. Slipping between the two, critics tend to subordinate the theory of a character's voice to that of narrative voice, even as they take for granted some definition of a character's voice in order to talk about narrative personae. Postmodernist theory further forces us to interrogate the singularity of subjectivity: can we speak of Tess as a unitary person, or of "the" narrator? If we think of the self as a site of social production, an intersection of discourses rather than a pure origin of churchgoers, defiantly pleads with the orthodox Vicar for Christian burial, and becomes assimilated to a "Nature who respects not the social law."

Nature respects instead individual difference. The inadequacy of received texts seems universally applicable, but the focus of moral formulae on chastity orients their attack against women. One voice oppressing women, for example, is the "trade voice" of the man who paints Mosaic laws on barns. "Thou shalt not, commit--." What he calls the "tex" links Tess to sex, and though unjustly applied to "dangerous young females" like herself, "the words entered Tess with accusatory horror" (12.101-12). An Augustinian at heart, for whom chastity is a matter of the will and not of the body, Hardy challenges the Clare family's Pauline cult of chastity. Tess's human complexities resist their stereotype of the "simple" or "unsullied country maid" and make it difficult "to apply the words" of Proverbs 31 to her genuine virtue.

Hardy does not allow Tess to remain a totally passive object of description by his male characters. Nonetheless he demonstrates that when she does speak up, men try to silence her. Despite his sympathy
for her, the young Vicar exclaims, "Don't talk so rashly" (14.124). At other moments, men silence her by rejecting her words or interpreting them through stereotypical codes.\(^6\) In one of the most dramatic scenes of the novel, Alec argues that women don't mean what they say.

"I didn't understand your meaning till it was too late."'"That's what every woman says."'"How can you dare to use such words!" she cried, turning impetuously upon him, her eyes flashing as the latent spirit (of which he was to see more some day) awoke in her. "My God! I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?" (12.97)

Adrian Poole observes of this exchange, "She is taking possession of a cliche, and this is inseparable from the taking possession of her own body at this moment. In the face of men's threat to dispossess the woman of her own body, of the right to speech--to reduce her to physical and linguistic cliche--, Tess re-claims that body and that right to speech, repossessing the discarded and supposedly empty shell!" ("Men's Words," 342).\(^7\)

Angel too embraces stereotypes of femininity. When he idealizes her as Demeter and Artemis, she responds, "Call me Tess." "Yet the slave to custom and conventionality," he translates her "no" into "yes": "his experience of women was great enough for him to be aware that the negative often meant nothing more than the preface to the affirmative" (T 28.224). He condescendingly interprets her "self-suppression," as if he were interpreting a text.

"She is a dear dear Tess," he thought to himself, as one deciding on the true construction of a difficult passage. "Do I realize solemnly enough how utterly and irretrievably this little womanly thing is the creature of my good or bad faith and fortune? I think not. I could not, unless I were a woman myself." (34.278)

Just as Angel must learn at the outset of his stay in Talbothays to differentiate the typical and unvarying country man "Hodge" into "beings of many minds, ... men every one of whom walked in his own individual way the road to dusty death," so he must learn to "disintegrate" the falsifying projections by men onto individual women (18.152).\(^8\)

Social codes confine women in history. The past as masculine event ironically names the present. In a controversial instance, the narrator comments on the unspeakable violence done to Tess by Alec in the well-named woods of The Chase. In this symbolically darkened and dimmed setting, the narrator ironically suggests that historical justice somehow visits the sins of the fathers upon the daughters, whereas a closer examination even of that maxim suggests instead a historical repetition of the sins of powerful men against simple peasant girls. Here we find one of the cruxes in interpretation of the novel, for giving voice to the historian is one of the narrator's functions that splits the narrative voice asunder and severs it from the "woman's story."\(^9\)

Opposed to men's maxims, then, we find complex womanly experience, given expression in Tess's voice, one of Hardy's most brilliant inventions. Fluty, murmuring, quavering, stammering, panting, its breaks and stops call to mind Julia Kristeva's \textit{semeiotike}, that theory of fluidity, contradiction, disruption, and silence in a feminine, pre-Oedipal language.\(^10\) Hardy's narrator assimilates three features above all to the feminine: Tess's "native phrases," her emotional fusion of body and words, and her silences.
The opening chapters link Tess's voice to her mother's through their love of song, superstitions, and use of dialect. As Ralph Elliot suggests, Hardy's "reliance upon archaic or local language seems like a deliberate attempt to free contemporary English of its more inhibiting, 'male' associations."11 In manuscript, Hardy initially added dialectal phrasing, heightening his heroine's links to an archaic, rural society. The figure called Love or Rosemary (before she became Tess) started off in the first pages of Hardy's draft speaking standard English even at home; manuscript changes then added dialect for Tess, especially in states of emotion, "when excited by joy, surprise, or grief" (MS f19).12 In yet later versions, dialect took on class and intellectual connotations: Tess, who plans to become a school teacher, speaks "ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality" (3.21).

Bilingual by training, once Tess leaves home she speaks a refined "Sixth Standard" English, close to that spoken by the better educated characters of the novel, though less abstract and complex. Through Angel she acquires the repertoire of a more educated, disillusioned, middle-class man. Indeed, later editions stripped dialect from Tess's speech after she leaves Marlott, a process that Laird attributes to Hardy's desire to dignify Tess.13 These changes created a problem: how to mark Tess's voice as that of a woman.

Hardy dealt with that problem, I think, by foregrounding features that he could encode as feminine. He counterbalanced the more universal and sophisticated features in Tess's acquired language, by assimilating her speech to her body and to nature. Hardy's notebooks record the semiotic truth that "there are looks, & tones, & gestures, which form a significant language of their own" (Björk 1.3). Hardy enumerates bits of her body and, as he does so, introduces the notion of body language: "her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape." Not her words but her peony mouth, displaced from speech into a flower of speech, has "eloquence." Likewise, her "eloquent" eyes "flash" and confess. "Every seesaw 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" (28.228).

Of a woman's speaking "parts," the heart is one of the most important. When Tess baptizes her dying child Sorrow, she speaks "boldly and triumphantly in the stopt-diapason note which her voice acquired when her heart was in her speech" (14.120).14 Here, the musical term "stoptdiapason," for the muffled, higher note reached when an organ pipe is stopped, evokes harmonious sublimity. At the same time, it reminds us of the "stops" in Tess's speech, the breaks that mark the muffling of her story.

Tess's fragments and her fusion of body with language typify Hardy's representation of her voice as a vehicle of poetic truth, whose breaks fall naturally rather than according to the dictates of art and grammar. During her engagement, for example, Tess speaks in ecstatic fragments, dictated by the "leapings of her heart," the voice and laughter of a woman in love: "Some of the dairy-people, who were also out of doors on the first Sunday evening after their engagement, heard her impulsive speeches, ecstasized to fragments, though they were too far off to hear the words discoursed; noted the spasmodic catch in her remarks, broken into syllables by the leapings of her heart, as she walked leaning on his arm; her contented pauses, the occasional laugh upon which her soul seemed to ride--the laugh of a woman in company with the man she loves and has won from all other women--unlike anything else in nature" (31.249). This "articulatory physiology" (Elliot 340) links natural, spontaneous poetry to the feminine.

One of the most extraordinary passages in which Hardy uses body language to express Tess's feelings is the lunchbreak during the Marlott harvest, when she suckles the infant Sorrow who has been brought to
her: "When the infant had taken its fill the young mother sat it upright in her lap, and looking into the far distance dandled it with a gloomy indifference that was almost dislike; then all of a sudden she fell to violently kissing it some dozens of times, as if she could never leave off, the child crying at the vehement of an onset which strangely combined passionateness with contempt" (14.114). Such preverbal communication with the preverbal Sorrow links the woman's sexual and linguistic roles in a traditional way. Furthermore, Tess's violence here evokes a particular form of "maternal anger" not often recognized in literature written by men. Hers is certainly the anger of the repressed voice, but it is also the anger of the exploited body, of a maternity whose pleasures have been fatally contaminated by rape. This anger will find expression finally in violence (Ingham 74).

Essential to Hardy's presentation of Tess as a young woman who yearns to leave her body behind while stargazing is the treachery of a woman's body as voice. Holes in your stockings "don't speak," says her mother Joan, but her "developing figure" does--and it "belie" her age. Angel, when he wishes to decode Tess's rejection of marriage, "conned the characters of her face as if they had been hieroglyphics" telling him what he wants to hear (28.225). Tess finally mutilates her eyebrows to prevent men from "conning" the hieroglyphs of her face and taking it as a screen for their projections.

Beyond body language lies silence as a feminine form of speech, whose multiple moral and sexual meanings underscore its significance as a way for Tess to voice herself. For Tess is "impressed" by soundlessness "as a positive entity rather than the mere negation of noise" (19.157). When she forces Alec to let her out of the gig, her "strategic silence" tells him she has lost her hat on purpose (8.66). When Angel presses her to marry him, her silence bespeaks her self-effacement on behalf of her friends and his well-being (31.246). Still later during their engagement, Tess's silence concerning her past voices her irrepressible desires as well as her mother's advice. At different moments, then, silence can voice resentment, conscience, or erotic drives.

Yet finally, her vow not to write Angel until written to bespeaks "dumb and vacant fidelity" (35.296). Imposed silence is the badge of woman's subjection and the sign of her vacancy, her chastity. The moment when Tess does speak out is catastrophic; as the title of the next "phase" reveals, if she speaks, "the woman pays." Tess knows this economy of speech: "She would pay to the uttermost farthing; she would tell, there and then" (34.284). Ironically, when she and Angel are united, she urges him to mute the past. She has become like one of the polar birds at Flintcomb-Ash: "gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes--eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived, ... but of all they had seen which humanity would never see, they had brought no account" (43.367). "Dumb impassivity" records the journey of such travelers through pain.

II

To record silence necessitates a narrator's voice. "She thought," writes Hardy, "without actually wording the thought, how strange and godlike was a composer's power, who from the grave could lead through sequences of emotion, which he alone had felt at first, a girl like her who had never heard of his name" (13.107).

To speak for Tess means to define a particular woman's voice. Herein lies a problem. For to present Tess in her womanhood, the phases of maiden, mother, wife, mistress, and murderess, means to assimilate her to conventions about different feminine voices. Conversely, to distinguish Tess in her particularity seems to entail--for Hardy at least--assimilating her to masculine discourse.
Tess "herself," as we have already seen, rejects the body language conventionally assigned to women. After her confession, she rejects the feminine hysteries and "feminine" strategy of intimacy that might have enabled her to hold Angel. Her attempts to distinguish herself from the conventions of femininity elicit D. H. Lawrence's explanation of her plight as "despising herself in the flesh, despising the deep Female she was."16

Part of Tess's development, as even Alec notices, consists in her adopting Angel's "speech and phrases" (32.260). She proves her "reverential fidelity" to her husband--a model for the narrator's fidelity--by repeating verbatim Angel's syllogisms in "crystallized phrases." She learns and repeats his songs. More important, she turns his words to serve her own insights, as Adrian Poole has acutely observed:

"Our tremulous lives are so different from theirs, are they not?" he musingly observed to her, as he regarded the three figures [of her milkmaid-companions.]"Not so very different, I think," she said."Why do you think that?""There are very few women's lives that are not--tremulous," Tess replied, pausing over the new word as if it impressed her.(29.235)

For Angel's elitist reflection on the unthinking masses, she substitutes a more accurate polarity between the secure lives of men and "tremulous" lives of women. She insists that we must read through the lens not only of class but of gender.

Before she ever meets Angel, one may catch in Tess's vivid, metaphoric speech about blighted worlds as "stubbard trees" certain philosophic turns of phrase and questioning. These were not learnt "by rote," as Angel condescendingly suspects, since he judges her by her social origins. Tess knows "the ache of modernism" because "advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition--a more accurate expression by words in -logy & -ism, of sensations which men [& women] have vaguely grasped for centuries" (Hardy's insertion, MS f137-38, 19.160). Over time Tess does become more articulate in her pessimism. Hardy intensified the fluency and depth of her voice in his revisions "by increasing our sense of the different languages she speaks" (Poole 341, 342-43). Technically, the different linguistic repertoires she masters complicate our sense of Tess's voice. While our multiple discourses "speak" her, at the same time we hear her transfer codes to make them fit better the actualities she observes.

The last phase in her development is to pass from voice to écriture, from oral to written forms. The comparatively late location of Tess's letters to Angel, which we read first broken off, then transcribed in full, supports the illusion that Tess has developed from a meditative milkmaid into an articulate subject capable of verbalizing in writing her sense of selfhood. The late letter that follows Angel in his peregrinations is indeed passionate and eloquent, sufficiently powerful to wrench Angel out of himself and to call him back to her. Fragmentary echoes of her writing (when Hardy describes its reception by Angel) confirm the hermeneutic pattern of "antiphony" postulated in this essay. Her voice by passing from oral to written form acquires the necessary substantiality to be "heard," to be repeated and understood.

III

This leads into the second part of my argument. An exchange of voice lies at the very heart of Tess's relationship to Angel Clare. At the outset, Angel is drawn to Tess precisely because she seems to echo his own thoughts, in a different register. He recognizes his own skepticism in her remarks, which
distinguish her voice for him from among those of the other dairy-folk. We may detect a certain narcissism in his very respect for her: "At such times as this, apprehending the grounds of her refusal to be her modest sense of incompetence in matters social and polite, he would say that she was wonderfully well-informed and versatile—which was certainly true, her natural quickness, and her admiration for him, having led her to pick up his vocabulary, his accent, and fragments of his knowledge, to a surprising extent" (28.225). But Angel is also drawn to the "soft and silent Tess" (24.190). His embrace "stills" and deflects her attempts to confess; he interrupts with belittling assumptions and defers her speech: "No, no--we can't have faults talked of ... you shall tell me anything ... not now" (25.197, 33.269). She responds with "mute obedience." Their courtship, then, is marked by a conflict between his attraction to her conventionally feminine Otherness, including her muteness, and his sympathetic identification with her intimations of philosophic alienation (his own form of Otherness).

In a development inverting that of Tess, Angel acquires the body language of a farmer, more expressive eyes, and phrases like "a drop of pretty tipple." He assimilates a cottage's "tone" much to the horror of his superfine clerical brothers, who hear his "growing social ineptness." Her shift is marked by gender, his by class. This process of mutual adaptation comes to grief with the climactic double confession on the wedding night. Angel "seemed to be her double" (34.285) in telling Tess his story; as she responds she sees "tis just the same!" He, however, cannot grasp the parallel until he draws closer to the phenomena of nature, learns to recognize the "mutely Miltonic" among the countryfolk, and hears "the voices of inanimate things" (18.152-53). He must discern the new note of Tess in the babble of conventions in order to respond; symbolically he cannot receive her letters until he is psychologically ready to answer.

Once in Brazil, Angel recounts not only his own story but that of Tess to a stranger.17 The retransmission of Tess's story catalyzes his return and the final modulation of his voice. Broken by illness and emotion, his sentences are interrupted by pauses and dashes, much as Tess's have been in the past. "Ah--it is my fault!" said Clare. But he could not get on. Speech was as inexpressive as silence" (45.484). At Stonehenge finally, he renounces speech altogether.

The narrative traces these two main intersecting lines, the masculinization of Tess's voice and the feminization of Angel's.18 Their reciprocal transformation is possible, because our gendering of language is both arbitrary and ambivalent. As Hillis Miller puts it in a reading of Virginia Woolf, the great modern theorist of literary androgyny, ways of writing "like a woman" or "like a man" "tend to change places or values in the moment of being defined and enacted."19 Hardy uses the symmetrical structure of the novel to reinforce the themes of language and silence and understanding through exchange.

Beyond Tess's exchange of voice with Angel lie parallels between her voice and that of the polyglot narrator. A number of critics have noted a "feminine principle" in the narration.20 Hardy appears to have constructed deliberate parallels between what the narrator says and what Tess says or thinks. This convergence bears on Tess's development. Hardy, Mary Jacobus says, "starts with an unformed heroine, and shows us the emergence of a reflective consciousness close to his own" ("Tess's Purity," 324). The congruence between Tess and the narrator also bears on Hardy's basic project, his desire to create the ventriloquistic illusion that for once we can hear a woman's story. Hence the ambiguous parallel between the narrator's use of superstition and the heroine's inclination to lend it credence, or between Hardy's notorious penchant to formulae of philosophic fatalism (called "Tessimism" by one reviewer) and Tess's view of life on this "blighted" star (Life, 265). The poetry of her ecstatic speech and her
flavorful analogies (the lords and ladies, the stubbard trees) actualize another aspect of the author's own craft.

In addition, we may point to a number of close verbal echoes that assimilate her prophetic knowledge to a narrator's control and omniscience. Tess is permitted to foresee Angel's complaint that she is not the woman he has been loving: "she you love is not my real self, but one in my image; the one I might have been!" (33.273). Tess's ability to enter into another resembles her sensitivity to the voices of nature; commenting on those crepuscular moments when she intensifies natural processes until they seem a part of her own story, the narrator declares that her pathetic projections are not a fallacy but in a sense true: "For the world is only a psychological phenomenon and what they seemed they were" (13.108). Implicitly, Tess becomes a figure for the imagination.

IV

Briefly, by way of a conclusion, I want to review three problems directly related to Tess's voice. First, the complexity—even inconsistency—of the narrative voice. Hardy's effort to wrestle with the codes of masculinity and femininity ironically traps him in their repetition. In narrating Tess's struggle against the "tex" of womanhood, Hardy attempts to break the hold of such discourses over the individual. Yet at the same time, in proposing to represent Tess "faithfully" as a "pure" woman, he inexorably falls subject to other, equally conventional discourses. Within Hardy's system of polarities, "sex and nature are assigned to the female" in an ideological tragedy that forces Tess to play the conventional passive role.21

Hardy's divided view of conventions about the feminine continuously complicates the narrative representation of Tess. We may admire, for example, his empathetic depiction of Tess wandering at dusk, hearing "formulae of bitter reproach" in the gusts of oncoming night. The scene vividly attests to her imagination, her internalization of social attitudes ("what they seemed they were"), and the identification of an outsider with the realm of nature. Simultaneously, however, the narrator affirms his distance from Tess's self-condemnation and his superiority to "moral hobgoblins" (13.108). The split structure, recreating the narrative hierarchy, undermines the autonomy of Tess as subject and by its inconsistency also undermines the authority of the narrator.22 By opening a gap between masculine authority and feminine illusion, Hardy puts back into question the whole project of narrative fidelity. The only possible fidelity seems to lie in acknowledging distortion by gender.

At a second level, gender categories contaminate our criticism too. Many readers privilege the more sensually expressive, that is, the more "natural" heroine of the manuscript (Love, Cis, or Rosemary) as the true Tess. Her sensuality and attachment to her rural roots seem to them to make her a more credible woman than the Tess of the final version, held to falsify Hardy's "original intention" (Jacobus, 331). Confusion extends to discussions of Tess's language, which tend to slip between questions of sexual explicitness and linguistic repertoire. Some see in the purging of dialect from Love's voice a bowdlerization of her sensuality. More accurately, in revising Hardy both muted and heightened Tess's sensual entanglements, both blurred and intensified her gender traits. The "late" Tess speaks in a mixed voice that links her to "the field-woman" as well as to Angel and the narrator. At both ends of this spectrum we are dealing with repertoires (i.e., with the reproduction of linguistic stereotypes).

More positively, this intersection of conflicting repertoires points toward a hermeneutic exchange of voice between Tess and of the narrator. Reading the novel as a metanarrative about voice helps us see in greater detail not only problems Hardy encountered in his narrative, but his achievement. Tess's
postulated voice permits a creative extension of authorial voice. In part, a nineteenth-century male writer may center his fiction on a female protagonist in order to expose the contradictions of bourgeois, particularist individualism or the inequities of existing gendered hierarchies. In part, also, his effort to represent "faithfully" a heroine's voice and experience leads him toward an unrepresented zone of experience and language.

This experiment in a "feminine" voice sheds light on Hardy's much debated narrative gaps. The unseen rape, the missing four-page note to Angel, the omitted double confession have been condemned as suppressions of Tess's voice and experience, or even censorship of moments when Hardy's male rivals possess his beloved heroine. In a review for the *Fortnightly Review* (1892), Francis Adams complains, "The gaps that represent bad work are too large and too frequent." Franz Stanzel suggests that Hardy censored his own text to prevent readers from reaching an independent (negative) opinion of his heroine.

From a feminist perspective, Childers charges that Hardy "takes away from Tess all power to speak what she means" (329). Boumelha finds Tess's consciousness all but edited out, part of a larger tragic pattern, "the ideological elision of woman, sex, and nature." This elision means that Tess is "most woman" when she is "dumb" (122-23). Hillis Miller complains in *Fiction and Repetition* about the "effacement" of Tess's violation and "the similar failure to describe directly all the crucial acts of violence which echo Tess's violation before and after its occurrence" (118). Such charges are particularly ironic, given Hardy's own struggle against the gaps imposed by censorship. His *Explanatory Note* to the first edition complains of the "piecemeal mode of parturition" and his need to rejoin limbs and trunk. Again in the *Life*, he describes the struggle in virtually sexual terms, as one to preserve "the novel intact," not "mutilated" by censorship to eliminate "improper explicitness" of certain passages (*Life*, 232).

Interpreted as an assimilation of Tess's "feminine" language, Hardy's pauses acquire fresh complexity. In one sense, the blank pages between "phases" constitute a silent "body language" for Hardy's text. Such breaks, of course, have no single meaning, as the interplay between the two central examples makes clear. The gap between Alec's discovery of the sleeping Tess and the beginning of the second phase symbolically renders the tearing of flesh that it literally does not describe; such a gap is a pure literary convention for the socially taboo or the unspeakable. When Hardy, however, repeats this narrative gap on the wedding night, at the moment when Tess reveals her innermost secret—that is, the secret moment that we know as the previous gap in the narrative—he ironically plays upon an (absent) hymeneal rupture, the unconsummated marriage, and points us toward another initiatory knowledge, for which Angel is not ready. The result is that Hardy brings to the foreground the sexuality of story telling. Reversing the teleological (male) sexual drive to which Peter Brooks compares narrative, these sexual breaks in Hardy mime the rupture enacted by women's storytelling. They foreshadow the broken line that Virginia Woolf would describe in *Room of One's Own*.

Hardy's silences reproduce but displace Tess's difficulty in coming to speech. We have been asked whether her story will "bear" telling, a burden it seems, that Tess alone must take on. A curious inversion takes place: the narrative becomes the margin for her silently spoken secret, raising the question of the propriety of narrative-making itself. The problem of giving voice to a woman's story ironically becomes a figure for the problem of giving voice to experience and to the Other at all.

Hardy's silences experiment with a discourse he encoded as feminine. Such experiments are typical of
nineteenth-century fiction. We must not forget, however, that the construction and figurative transposition of a "feminine" discourse contain the seeds of their own destruction. Repeatedly, resistance to the social code of gender is undermined by the reinscription of a gendered linguistic code. By setting these tensions up, Hardy exposes the perpetual displacement of woman as figure. The violence and other costs of both silence and speech for women are conspicuously absent from the male narrator's domain; the presence or absence of choice makes a critical difference. Ultimately, then, Hardy forces us back upon the question whether silence expresses the ineffable or more simply records the unspeakable, and the most pervasive form of violence against women.

Notes


4. Chapman, The Language of Thomas Hardy, 125.

5. "I have for a long time been in favour of woman-suffrage. ... I am in favour of it because I think the tendency of the woman's vote will be to break up the pernicious conventions in respect of women, customs, religion, illegitimacy, the stereotyped household (that it must be the unit of society), the father of a woman's child (that it is anybody's business but the woman's own) ... and other matters which I got into hot water for touching on many years ago." Letter of 11/30/06 to Mrs. Fawcett, cited in Gail Cunningham, "Thomas Hardy: New Women for Old," The New Woman and the Victorian Novel (London: Macmillan, 1978), 115. A. O. J. Cockshut, however, believes that "the attempt to turn Hardy into a feminist is altogether vain"; cited by Elaine Showalter, "The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge," in Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy, ed. Dale Kramer (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes, 1979), 101.

6. There is for any modern reader an obvious irony in giving these lines about the incapacity of men's words to a narrator who though anonymous, by his elaborately wrought, semireligious language, assimilates himself to the highly educated and confessional, masculine, roles of artist and priest. Omniscient condescension to the species "woman" here might not indicate conscious irony. In Tess and Jude such contradictions are probably deliberate, for they constantly rend the text.

7. Adrian Poole, "Men's Words and Hardy's Women," Essays in Criticism 31 (1981): 328-45, stresses Hardy's sensitivity to "the effort of men's words to circumscribe and describe, confine and define, women's bodies" (329). Hardy thematizes the difficulty throughout his oeuvre, as in A Pair of Blue Eyes, where Knight, who lacks "the trick of reading the truly enigmatical forces at work in women," "could pack them into sentences like a workman, but practically was nowhere" (20:226, 18:193).

8. Previous studies have focused on Tess's physical description and the sexualization of the masculine narrator's relationship to her: Mary Jacobus, "Tess's Purity," Essays in Criticism 26 (1976): 318-38;

9. The seduction plot that molds the relationship of Tess to the narrator is the subject of Dianne Sadoff's essay in this volume. For repetition in narrative representation, see Hillis Miller's chapter on Hardy in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Penny Boumelha refers to "narrative androgyny" in the narrator's relation to Tess: "she is not only spoken by the narrator but also spoken for" (Hardy and Women, 120).


11. Rather than a significant experiment by Hardy involving linguistic gender differences, Ralph W. V. Elliot finds inconsistency (*Thomas Hardy's English* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1984], 337); Adrian Poole finds "uncertainty," "Men's Words," 345n.24.

12. References to the manuscript are drawn from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Facsimile of the MS*, ed. Simon Gatrell (New York: Garland, 1986). A close examination of these changes reveals that Hardy also localized the vocabulary of John Durbeyfield, as well as that of Joan and Tess (see the edition of 1892). Significantly, however, the narrator's comments stress women's use of dialect rather than that of John.


14. This passage raises the question of the narrator's shifting relationship to Tess, for it adds that the voice "will never be forgotten by those who knew her." To explain the vocal mosaic of a narrator at times close to Tess, at times distant, Rosemarie Morgan argues for splintered narrative personae, U. C. Knoepflmacher for multiple narrators.


17. Angel is both a shadow of the narrator and a projection of the reader; his poetisms and conventionalism echo apparently deliberate misreadings of Tess by the narrator and our own problems of reception, which prevent us from hearing Tess's story. More positively the reader and the narrator, of course, strive like Angel to receive Tess's wounded name into our "bosom."

18. Showalter notes generally that for Hardy's heroes "maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female
suffering, an identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their own deepest selves" ("Unmanning," 101).


20. Irving Howe finds "a curious power of sexual insinuation, almost as if he were not locked into the limits of masculine perception but could shuttle between, or for moments yoke together, the responses of the two sexes" (Thomas Hardy, [London: Macmillan, 1967], 109). Showalter considers Hardy "one of the few Victorian male novelists who wrote in what may be called a female tradition" ("Unmanning," 99) and finds in his work "a consistent element of self-expression through women" "as screens or ghosts of himself" (101).


22. Boone, Tradition, argues that the linear seduction plot repeats through its relentless rhythms of pursuit and flight the violation it describes. Similarly, David Lodge complains that Hardy "undermines our trust in the reliability of Tess's response to Nature, which is his own chief rhetorical device for defending her character" (Language of Fiction [New York: Columbia University Press, 1966], 76). Boumelha comments on "Hardy's increasing interrogation of his own modes of narration": "The disjunctions in narrative voice, the contradictions of logic, the abrupt shifts of point of view ... disintegrate the stability of character as a cohering force, they threaten the dominance of the dispassionate and omniscient narrator, and so push to its limit the androgynous narrative mode that seeks to represent and explain the woman from within and without" (Hardy and Women, 132). James Kincaid revalues "the large and the local gaps" as evidence of creative "tentativeness and inconsistency," i.e., of openings rather than foreclosures ("Hardy's Absences," in Kramer, Critical Approaches, 202).


25. See Sadoff's interpretation of this fetishistic description, in this volume.


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