

CHAPTER 5

The Woodlanders (1887)

It is difficult to say what kind of a novel *The Woodlanders* is; it draws on genres so widely disparate as to be at times incompatible. Further, the word 'transitional' – which, it must be said, has been applied to almost all of Hardy's novels – is perhaps more apposite here than in many cases. It is possible to isolate elements of practically any earlier Hardy novel within the text, and its reminiscences of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, in particular, are quite evident. At first sight, it might seem that such reminiscences could be dismissed as backward glances or tired repetitions, particularly in the light of Hardy's statement that the 'woodland story . . . (which later took shape in *The Woodlanders*)' was originally conceived, but soon abandoned, as the immediate successor to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (*Early Life*, p. 135). Although there have been some attempts to reconstruct a putative Ur-novel,¹ there is really no evidence that any of the extant text dates from the period of this earliest intention. Nevertheless, the novel certainly recalls that earlier work, not least in the apparent recrudescence of the pastoral mode which is invoked by the patterning of the seasonal cycle, the fertility-rites and fertility-deities, and the underlying myth of Eden and Fall that is evoked by the pervasive apple tree motif. At the same time, the central plot – the returned native faced with a choice between lovers, that also serves to focus a choice between possible allegiances of class and lifestyle – clearly recapitulates that of *The Return of the Native*, and, indeed, that of *Under the Greenwood Tree*.² Yet the new and challenging centrality of the sexual and marital themes in *The Woodlanders* marks also its pivotal role in the career of its author. As Gregor has remarked, 'the significance of Grace [lies] in the fact that she provides Hardy with an opportunity to do a first sketch for Sue Bridehead.'³ Her dilemma, caught between Giles Winterborne and Fitzpiers, her repudiation and

ultimate re-acceptance of the first marital partner, the 'Daphnean instinct' (p. 310) that impels her to flee the returning Fitzpiers and the superficial pieties of her readings in the Bible and the prayer book, foreshadow Sue Bridehead's agonised hesitations between Jude and Phillotson, her leap from Phillotson's bedroom window and her violent espousal of religious orthodoxy: Grace's gentle lapse into a concern with propriety rehearses in miniature the desolating 'breakdown' of Sue Bridehead.

Such disparate formal elements point to the novel's major characteristic, the uncertainties of genre, rapid substitutions of points of view and abrupt shifts of tone that make it unsettling to read. Several critics, both contemporary and modern, share an unease arising from the 'cynicism' (a recurring word), not merely of the obdurate primacy of plot manipulation which insists on reinstating an unrepentant Fitzpiers to his conjugal Grace, but also, more or less vaguely, of the novel's tone.⁴ It is not difficult, I think, to see what is meant. *The Woodlanders* (and particularly, as I shall go on to argue, the second half of it) shares with *The Well-Beloved*, and with no other work of its author, a self-consciousness that verges at times upon self-parody. References to literary models are almost obtrusively in evidence; Melbury, for example, falls at once into the cadence and rhetoric of Old Testament narrative in his appeal to Felice Charmond:

"I am an old man," said Melbury, "that, somewhat late in life, God thought fit to bless with one child, and she a daughter. Her mother was a very dear wife to me; but she was taken away from us when the child was young; and the child became precious as the apple of my eye to me, for she was all I had left to love" (p. 249).

The overtness of the novel's 'dialogue' with other texts and genres marks the degree of its self-reflexivity. Certainly, frequent literary allusions are in themselves nothing new in Hardy, but whereas that reference has hitherto – say, in *The Return of the Native* – served primarily to bestow significance and gravity upon the text by invoking the authority of consecrated literary models, the allusiveness of *The Woodlanders* is often more ironic and oblique, undercutting rather than reinforcing its own aspirations to tragic status. The elements of tragedy which allow the narrator to claim for his narrative 'a

grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean' (p. 40) disconcertingly adjoin elements of pastoral, melodrama, and even farce. There is, for instance, a curious and disturbing blend of melodrama and farce in the scene in which the three lovers of Fitzpiers stare in genuine grief at his empty nightshirt, or, again, in the self-mockingly obvious metaphorical quality of the man-trap in which Grace loses her skirt.⁵ The various Spinozan and Shelleyan pretensions of Fitzpiers at once invoke and unceremoniously parody the Romantic egotism that had undergone a more tragic scrutiny in *The Return of the Native*, and the parodic component is strengthened in the successive revisions that make flippant insincerity and selfishness more prominent in his character.⁶ The brooding Romantic discontent of his early morning soliloquy ("Ah, Edred . . . to clip your own wings when you were free to soar!" (p. 237)) inclines, again, towards parody in the overwritten quality which it shares with Grace's late conversion to melodrama: "O, Edred, there has been an Eye watching over us to-night . . .!" (p. 366).

The Woodlanders, then, is characterised by its interrogative awareness of the literary modes within which it is working. That interrogation is crystallised in the figure of Grace Melbury, who is at the centre of its shifts in tone and point of view. For it is not possible to represent Grace satisfactorily throughout as a realist heroine: rather, she migrates unsettlingly between pastoral survival, tragic protagonist, realist centre of consciousness, and melodramatic heroine. The very fluidity of her narrative role and function makes of her at times an almost nebulous figure. The narrator is able to offer summaries of other characters, guaranteeing their authoritative quality by reference to 'fact'. Of Fitzpiers, for example, he writes this:

But, as need hardly be said, Miss Melbury's view of the doctor as a merciless, unwavering, irresistible scientist was not quite in accordance with *fact*. The *real* Dr. Fitzpiers was a man of too many hobbies to show likelihood of rising to any great eminence in the profession he had chosen. . . . *In justice to him* it must be stated that he took such studies as were immediately related to his own profession in turn with the rest (p. 148; *my italics*).

The 'truth' of his account of Grace, on the other hand, rests in its denial of the possibility of giving a fixed and authoritative summary:

What people therefore saw of her in a cursory view was very little; in truth, mainly something that was not she. The woman herself was a conjectural creature who had little to do with the outlines presented to Sherton eyes; a shape in the gloom, 'whose true quality could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient attention which nothing but watchful loving-kindness ever troubles itself to give (p. 69).

It is only by a sustained act of attention that she becomes more than 'conjectural', taking on more than 'outlines' and 'shape'. The tentative and deferential tone of the narrator's comments is notable.

In view of this, it is not surprising that Grace seems at times empty, passive, a mere reflector or register of the other characters, as she is to Melbury at once the object and the vehicle of his social ambition. Even her sexual attraction towards Fitzpiers seems, at their first meeting, simply to reflect back the unknowing gaze of desire which she intercepts in the mirror. Yet it is the very insubstantiality of her characterisation in this sense that allows her sexuality to become the central point upon which the novel's formal disjunctions revolve. A closer examination of the fluctuating presentations of Grace in the narrative will show how sexuality and marriage figure for the first time in Hardy as the explicit concern of the fiction.

Elements of pastoral, and particularly of pastoral elergy, contribute significantly to both the structure and the tone of *The Woodlanders* in a way that will not be repeated in Hardy. Jacobus has drawn attention to the way in which the novel draws upon a traditional structuring device of the pastoral, the cycle of the seasons. Here, though, it floats free from its conventional significations (the 'life-cycle' of fruition, decay, death, and rebirth) and attaches itself ironically to the frustrating and inconclusive relationships of the human characters.⁷ Again, the elegiac tone is in excess of its ostensible focus in the plot, the death of Giles Winterborne, and the ironic counterpointing of the changing seasons at once invokes and undermines the implied regeneration which concludes the pastoral elegy. The community of *The Woodlanders* is not merely depleted by the loss of Giles, but radically devitalised. This is a use of pastoral that presses beyond the simply ironic; in the elegiac excess, there dwells almost a sense of mourning for its

own loss, the mark of the text's recognition of the final inadequacy of the pastoral mode.

Nevertheless, critical readings of *The Woodlanders* have often emphasised the novel's elements of pastoral at the expense of all its other modes of writing. Dattler's is a particularly explicit pastoral account:

[*The Woodlanders*] is rather a personification of the eternal struggle between Town and Country. The town represents the sophisticated, the artificial, the meretricious element of the story; the country, the deeply seated, instinctive, and forthright habit of living. The townees rejoice in every attribute, but lack virtue. The country-folk lack many things, the graces of intellect, the advantage of riches, but are sustained by their innate well-being.⁸

There are a number of objections that could be raised to this construction of a scenario opposing the simple and traditional life of those who live in harmony with 'nature' (Giles Winterborne and Marty South) to the corrupting sophistication of the demonic urban intruders (Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond) who invade and destroy it.⁹ First, in reducing Grace's hesitations between her two lovers to a mere symbolic transposition of some timeless and genderless choice between rusticity and urbanity, it quite simply suppresses the importance of the sexual choice, travestying the complex specificities of her dilemma into some allegorical quirk of temperament. Secondly, it would appear at least naive to enforce upon the text a pastoral reading which is not only made, but also resisted, within it. It is Grace, separated by her education from the society she observes, who sees in Giles' seasonal cider-making work the image of 'Autumn's very brother' (p. 225), as is made clear when she later notices a change in him: 'Was [his face] not thinner, less rich in hue, less like that of ripe Autumn's brother to whom she had formerly compared him?' (p. 320). Such pastoralising patronage has already been bitterly repudiated by Giles: Grace calls down to him from the balcony where she sits musing in Keatsian and Chattertonian vein upon the beauties of 'the margin of Pomona's plain' (p. 197), but Giles declines to be subsumed into the landscape, and reminds her sharply that he is "'moiling and muddling for [his] daily bread'" (p. 199). In an analogous episode, Fitzpiers, coming to read in the woods, chances upon a group of labourers stripping the bark from

felled trees; he is charmed by 'the scene and the actors' of 'this sylvan life' (p. 159), but the Arcadian quality is undercut (even if not for him) by Marty's matter-of-fact recall of its economic realities by which she, as a woman worker, is doubly oppressed:

"You seem to have a better instrument than they, Marty," said Fitzpiers. "No, sir," she said, holding up the tool, a horse's leg-bone fitted into a handle and filed to an edge; "'tis only that they've less patience with the twigs, because their time is worth more than mine." (p. 159).

Such collisions between pastoral and realism throw the pastoral reading into question so overtly as to make its inadequacy as a critical analysis wholly evident.

But perhaps the most significant objection is that to read *The Woodlanders* simply as pastoral, whether 'classical', 'traditional', or 'grotesque',¹⁰ is to make an ideological resolution of the competing views of nature which inhabit the text and are played out upon the figure of Grace. Alongside the pastoral nature, there runs a quite incompatible vein of the Spencerian-Darwinian representation of nature as the site of a struggle for survival in which mere physical proximity is certain to produce conflict and involuntary violence, as the woodland trees are 'disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows' (p. 323), or as Melbury and Grace drive off in their carriage 'silently crushing delicate-patterned mosses, hyacinths, primroses, lords-and-ladies, and other strange and common plants, and cracking up little sticks that lay across the track' (p. 162). The Spencerian component of such a view resides, of course, in the consecration of the evolutionary struggle as an apt, and even inevitable, metaphor for human society, so that 'the Unfulfilled Intention' (p. 82) is expressed alike in the distortions and stutings of the woodland growths and in the deflected and frustrated plans and desires of the novel's protagonists.¹¹ This stress, all but unique in Hardy, upon the continuity of human and non-human modes of existence is mediated in part through what has been called "'naturalistic" imagery (imagery bestowing vegetal and human qualities upon humans)¹², a variety of imagery that co-exists in the novel with the use of a 'pathetic' imagery more often evoking a Romantic view of nature. The organicism of such imagery, the emphasis upon the deter-

minations of environment on physical and mental development alike (Marty's hands that 'might have skilfully guided the pencil or swept the string, had they only been set to do it in good time' (p. 43) or the 'wildly imaginative' inferences drawn from 'narrow premises' (pp. 39–40), at least in part because of the isolation of Little Hintock), and the importance of the group and its interaction at the expense of the single, dominating protagonist: all of these mark the novel's closeness at times to French naturalism, prominent in England at this period rather as the subject of a fierce critical controversy than as a model of literary practice.¹³ This irruption of naturalism, as I shall go on to argue, partially determines the form taken by the novel's treatment of its sexual themes.

Nevertheless, the pastoral polarisation of rusticity and urbanity as equivalents to innocence and sophistication unquestionably takes its point of departure in *The Woodlanders* from Grace's position as an educated country-woman; what may be called 'nature' (doubly constituted by her gender and her rural origins) reconstructed as 'culture' (by the urban education that her father's relative wealth and ambitions have prescribed for her). It is in this sense that her conflicting allegiances towards Giles and Fitzpiers make of her a tragic protagonist. It is true that the novel as a whole cannot be fitted into any current definition of tragedy; Kramer, for example, scrupulously and fruitlessly examines the text for evidence of a single, dominant protagonist (whose absence is the more notable for the novel's chronological placing between *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*), a 'tragic flaw', or the cathartic release of pity and fear, and is obliged to find in it instead a modified tragic genre, the 'tragedy of the group'.¹⁴ But the novel does take up, if only to avert, the form of the double tragedy – that of a woman and of a man, sexual and intellectual – that had already given *The Return of the Native* its structure. In that earlier novel, the tragedies of Clym and Eustacia resolve themselves into a sexually-founded polarity of culture and nature; *The Woodlanders* reproduces that dualism, but within the compass of a single character, Grace Melbury. Her 'veneer of artificiality' and her 'latent early instincts' (p. 225), her 'modern nerves with primitive feelings' (p. 309), reveal her to be the first of Hardy's female characters to contain

within herself at least the potentialities for a tragic conflict between sexuality and the intellect. In this, as in much else, she prefigures Sue Bridehead; but whereas Sue's conflict between 'flesh' and 'spirit' will take on its full sharpness from her attempts to transcend sexual ideology and her re-implication in it by marriage (or pseudo-marriage) and motherhood, the conflict within Grace presents itself as a simple opposition of mind and body, in the guise of education overlaid upon instinct. The 'instinctual' body, however, finds expression only in the mildest of marital transgressions – a single kiss, the chaste nights in Giles' hut, the quickly retracted retrospective claim to an adulterous relationship with him – and equally, the 'educated' mind leads her to only the gentlest of interrogations of the ideology of marriage: 'She wondered whether God really did join them together' (p. 363). Her breakdown, consequently, consists in a lapse into a concern with propriety which falls short of a tragic intensity.

If we are to accept Rebekah Owen's account, Hardy found the ending of *The Woodlanders* unsatisfactory (as he did that of *The Return of the Native*), and, further, saw that the problem revolved upon the figure of Grace:

He said that Grace never interested him much; he was provoked with her all along. If she would have done a really self-abandoned, impassioned thing (gone off with Giles), he could have made a fine tragic ending to the book, but she was too commonplace and straitlaced, and he could not make her.¹⁵

The difficulty, however, resides not in any conventionality of Grace's 'character', but rather in the form that the conflict which she is intended to focus takes on: that of a dualism which allows itself all too easily to be ideologically dissolved into the collision of rustic purity and urban corruption. With the death of Giles, the conflict is simply and definitively resolved by the removal of one pole, that of the 'natural'; and with that resolution vanishes the residual tragic potential of Grace's situation. The fulfilled tragedy of the man in this case obviates the necessity – and, indeed, withdraws the possibility – of the completion of the woman's tragedy.

The vehicle of the tragic component in *The Woodlanders* is a realist analysis of sexual and marital themes, and once more it must be said that this is not in itself new in Hardy. For the first

time, however, it is not marital breakdown (as in *The Return of the Native*) or a mistaken marital commitment to the wrong partner (as in *Far From the Madding Crowd*) that raises that prospect of a tragic outcome, but marital commitment *per se*. It is the first of Hardy's novels to make use of the fictional possibility of divorce, which had become possible in fact some thirty years previously, at the time when the novel is set,¹⁶ with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. It is not by coincidence that it should also be the first of Hardy's works openly to throw into question the very basis of the institution of marriage: a definitive and exclusive sexual commitment to the marital partner. Hardy himself draws attention to this theme, in a characteristically *faux naïf* fashion, in his 1895 Preface to the novel:

. . . it is tacitly assumed for the purposes of the story that no doubt of the depravity of the erratic heart who feels some second person to be better suited to his or her tastes than the one with whom he has contracted to live, enters the head of reader or writer for a moment (p. 35).

This is misleading, however, and not only in the sense which its obvious sarcasm signals, for the novel does not show the unmaking of a 'wrong' commitment in order to replace it by a second, 'right' commitment to a 'better suited' partner. That would be rather the pattern of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where the violent removal of Troy and Boldwood allows the interrupted courtship of Bathsheba and Oak to reach its fitting conclusion at last. Only by a drastic distortion of the tone of *The Woodlanders* can it be made to correspond to this account: 'Then, after Fitzpiers' salutary rustic cure and the Socratically placid death of Winterbourne, begins the quiet Indian-summer re-wooing of Grace by Fitzpiers, with happy ending.'¹⁷ Grace's eventual reunion with Fitzpiers is not so much enabled as enforced by the death of Giles, which puts an abrupt and decisive end to her emotional vacillations between the two men. Grace is not alone in such fluctuations; almost every character in the novel has more than one partner, either actually (as Felice Charmond has a dead husband, a discarded lover and a current one), or potentially (as Giles has both Grace and Marty South). The general multiplicity of involvements, frustrations and retractions undermines the notion of the exclusivity and irrevocability of the marriage contract. Marital and non-

marital liaisons alike are formed and broken by the vagaries of inconstant sexual desire, as much in the restrained and 'Daphnean' Grace as in the restlessly passionate Felice, whose strong feeling in itself marks her as doomed. Both these women experience desire as if it were an external compulsion to which they must submit, locating in Fitzpiers the source of an emanation of 'compelling power' which calls forth in Felice a gloomy fatalism and in Grace a somnambulistic passivity:

She felt like a woman who did not know what she had been doing for the previous hour; but supposed with trepidation that the afternoon's proceedings, though vague, had amounted to an engagement between herself and the handsome, coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers (p. 186).

The 'coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers', however, is himself acting no less under compulsion: he is drawn against his conscious, rational decisions both to marry Grace (of whom he has earlier concluded that "'Socially we can never be intimate'" (p. 157)) and, later, to carry on his affair with Felice. Nor is Grace the only sleep-walker; Fitzpiers is asleep at the moment of his first meeting with Grace, and returns from an assignation with Felice asleep on horseback; and Giles absently caresses the flower at Grace's breast 'Almost with the abstraction of a somnambulist' (p. 226). Desire operates in *The Woodlanders* as a kind of mechanism of natural law, and the novel's naturalist impulse is nowhere more evident than in the quasi-scientific accounts of desire (in the shape of 'emotion') which are offered in relation to Grace, Fitzpiers and Felice in turn. Grace, on her return to Little Hintock from school, is 'a vessel of emotion, going to empty itself on she knew not what' (p. 87). The metaphor as used by the doctor has, fittingly, more scientific precision: "' . . . people living insulated, as I do by the solitude of this place, get charged with emotive fluid like a Leyden jar with electric, for want of some conductor at hand to disperse it'" (p. 142). The two elements of the phenomenon – the building up of emotion followed by the random discharge – recur in Felice's account: "'Hintock has the curious effect of bottling up the emotions till one can no longer hold them; I am often obliged to fly away and discharge sentiments somewhere, or I should die outright'" (p. 210).

There is, of course, an obvious exception to this law, and that is Marty South. It is clear, however, that her passionate

singleness of commitment is attained only at the cost of that voluntary abdication of her sexuality which opens the novel and is invoked once more in her 'abstract humanism' (p. 375) at its conclusion.¹⁸ Marty's cutting off of her hair is at once a sexual act, a 'rape' that leaves her 'deflowered' (p. 52), and a sacrifice of her sexuality; it is a self-mutilation that makes her (as her name suggests) androgynous, and thereby, within the novel's Darwinian framework, vows her to stasis and death. The Schopenhauer-influenced reading of Darwin's account of the role of women in the evolutionary process that Hardy was sometimes apt to make surfaces in the novel here: women, by virtue of their reproductive function, are the most active vehicle of the operation of the processes of sexual selection, and Marty's irrelevance to this process has, by the end of the novel, isolated her from its central concerns. It is for related ideological reasons that Felice Charmond dies (at least in volume versions of the text¹⁹) less from the direct effects of a bullet than from that interdependence of mind and body, postulated at its strongest or at least its most complex in women, that allows pregnancy – 'her personal condition at the time' (p. 344) – to render her particularly vulnerable to shock and fear. Fitzpiers' musings on the union of Nature and the Idea (p. 155) take on a further irony from their appearance in a novel whose representation of sexuality finds its point of departure as close to Zola as to Shelley.

Desire, then, represents an arbitrary but compelling irruption of the irrational into the area of choice and decision, producing in male and female characters alike a response of will-less acquiescence. Set against this is the exploration of marriage, not so much as experience (for the novel displays very little of any marital relationship) as, rather, in its function as a legal and ideological regulator of such lawless impulses, operating quite clearly on a gender differential. It is once more the figure of Grace that provides a narrative centre of consciousness for this investigation; through her, that contemporary sexual ideology which would polarise virtue and vice into wife and mistress is tested and discredited. When she first finds Fitzpiers out in his past and present amours, her response is unconventional, for it is her mistaken passivity in the face of her father's plans for her, rather than any jealousy of her husband's

wandering affections, that disturbs her: 'But though possessed by none of the feline wildness which it was her moral duty to experience, she did not fail to suspect that she had made a frightful mistake in her marriage' (p. 229). The irony which here encompasses the 'moral duty' is dispelled, as the narrative progresses, by the emergence of an unexpected and interesting alliance among the women of the novel. It is, for example, Melbury's 'allusion to Grace's former love for her' (p. 250), rather than any of his appeals to conscience or reputation, that most affects Felice. When the two women meet again, despite Grace's initial sick distaste for the encounter, what emerges most clearly is the likeness between them, and not the opposition. Grace looks at Felice 'like a wild animal on first confronting a mirror or other puzzling product of civilisation' (p. 254), and the polarity of nature and civilisation in the image (bringing with it all the pastoralising resonances of rusticity *vs.* urbanity, innocence *vs.* sophistication) can easily obscure the significance of the mirror, whose function, after all, is to reflect the observer – to reproduce similarity and not difference. Grace's generous transcendence of self-pity and self-righteousness – "'if I have had disappointments, you have had despairs'" (p. 256) – is followed by a further image of likeness, as the two women, disorientated and following separate paths through the wood, find themselves led back to the same point and to a moment of spontaneous physical supportiveness. (It is surely unnecessary to find any implications of a lesbian attachment in this scene, as Millgate does.²⁰) Once more *The Woodlanders* prefigures a later work here: the 'pure' and 'fallen' women who will be encompassed within the single figure of Tess Durbeyfield are here brought together by such juxtaposing imagery, as well as by the careful patterning and repetition that relates the adulterous liaison of Felice to the more decorous extra-marital relationship of Grace. This repetition is explicitly remarked in the novel: Giles tells Grace that he would not have risked his caress of the flower at her breast "'if I had not seen something like it done elsewhere – at Middleton lately'" (p. 226), and the narrator compares Grace's nursing of Giles with Felice's of Fitzpiers: 'Six months before this date a scene, almost similar in its mechanical parts, had been enacted at Hintock House' (p. 325).

Later in the novel Suke Damson, too, takes a place within this allying similarity. After Fitzpiers' accident, all three women – wife, past and present mistresses – gather round his bed in distress, and Grace hesitates over the contradictory demands of convention ('Ought she not to order Suke Damson downstairs and out of the house?' (p. 274) and of generosity ('But could she order this genuinely grieved woman away?' (p. 274). Her mixture of 'virtuous sarcasm' and of sympathy for 'these fellow-women whose relations with him were as close as her own' (p. 275) finds its analogue in the disconcerting blend of farce and compassion which marks the narration of the episode. What is crucial in it is the only half-sarcastic description of the women as "Wives all" (p. 275), for it goes directly to the main impetus of the novel's challenge to marriage: its naturalistic undermining of monogamy.

It would be wrong, however, to construct from this a kind of sexual pastoral in which the 'innocence' of desire is opposed to the 'alien intrusion' of marriage. Grace's dilemma over the choice of a marital partner provides the main realist element of *The Woodlanders*. Her reluctance to make a final commitment to either of her possible husbands results in part from the specificities of gender and class of her situation. Her much-vaunted education has given her some degree of access to the culture (or perhaps more accurately in her case, the manners) of the urban bourgeoisie; for a male character, as for Clym Yeobright, that education can, either in itself or by virtue of its opening up of certain kinds of employment, constitute at once the means and the mark of his class-mobility. Grace, on the other hand, is simply left by it 'as it were in mid-air between two storeys of society' (p. 235) until the new class-position is consolidated by a suitable marriage. Later, during her temporary separation from her husband, she will be left in a similar state of suspension, here sexual, as "neither married nor single" (p. 309), that marginalises her both literally and figuratively to the community during the period she spends in Giles' isolated hut. Marriage alone has the power to resolve this double ambiguity, of class and of sexual status; as her father puts it, "a woman takes her colour from the man she's walking with" (p. 114). Marriage is the sole recognised index of status for a middle-class woman; in this, Grace differs both from the mock-aristocrat Felice, who is

sustained by her independent wealth – itself, of course, acquired by marriage – and from the labourer Marty, whose class-position allows of no ambiguity.

In the light of this dependence upon a husband for the conferral of a social role, it is not surprising that the notion of propriety comes increasingly to regulate the progress of Grace's various relationships. The significance of propriety, as an awareness of potentially judging onlookers, is enacted in the mode of narration, with its constant shiftings of point of view, in which the centre of consciousness does not normally coincide with the protagonist of the action: so, for example, the growth of the liaison between Felice and Fitzpiers is given largely through the observation and interpretation of Melbury.²¹ It is in its narration that *The Woodlanders* takes its greatest distance from the naturalist novel, which normally assumes an authoritative and dispassionate – in short, a 'scientific' – narrative voice. The lack of such a unifying voice, by contrast, suggests the partiality of the succeeding points of view – a partiality enacted in turn by the way that so many events or crucial pieces of information are observed or overheard, rather than directly narrated. So, every main character except Giles Winterborne first appears in the novel as overheard, seen from afar, watched through a window or glimpsed in a mirror. Further, information obtained by such means is frequently misinterpreted: Melbury's decision not to 'sacrifice' his daughter in a marriage to Giles follows a snub by Felice which he attributes to Grace's presence at Winterborne's inauspicious Christmas party, but which the narrator attributes to Grace's greater freshness of beauty; and Tim Tangs sets his man-trap for Fitzpiers in the mistaken belief that there is a continuing affair between the doctor and Suke. The effect of this is to distance the narrative from logic and intention, undercutting the realist notion of the subject shaping a life in favour of an unpredictable 'great web' of interactions and effects. Michael Millgate has dismissed all this as 'little more than a rather literal-minded concern on Hardy's part of the question of how people know what they know',²² but it is surely just this manipulation of point of view that enforces the significance of propriety as a regulator of sexual behaviour upon the reader.

With the death of Giles, however, there is a rather abrupt shift

in the dominant narrative mode of the novel. Whereas Grace has for some time been the centre of consciousness, during the episodes of her separation from Fitzpiers and her turn towards Giles, there is a sudden withdrawal from such privileged access to her consciousness in this latter part of the novel. A series of increasingly remote observers and commentators are interposed between her and the narrator (Marty, Fitzpiers, Melbury and his employees, the anonymous observers on the Sheraton road), rendering her opaque and her behaviour all at once unmotivated. The slightly disconcerting effect is to turn her suddenly into something like a sly coquette in the style of *Fancy Day*, bargaining the terms of her return to her husband (no more foreign philosophy or French romances) with a most untragic knowingness. This brusque change of tone results from the shift of dominant genre in the novel, as the possibility of a tragic outcome recedes, and the inevitable reconciliation with Fitzpiers shapes up. The so-called 'happy ending' is in fact a most sardonic conclusion, and is brought about by means of a lurch into melodrama that verges at times upon high farce.

Throughout the novel, the most unequivocal focus of its semi-parodic, self-conscious literarity is the relationship of Felice and Fitzpiers.²³ It is evident in Fitzpiers' mediation of his emotions through scraps of Shelley and Spinoza, in Felice's self-image as the author and protagonist of a new *Sentimental Journey*, in the literary quality of a beauty that has reached its 'édition définitive' (p. 248), and in their joint invention of the narrative of their own romance through 'infinite fancies, idle dreams, luxurious melancholies, and pretty, alluring assertions which could neither be proved nor disproved' (p. 214). The relationship begins with a literary cliché, the dropped handkerchief (which is substituted in an 1896 revision for the marginally less trite gloves of earlier texts), and it ends with the superlatively melodramatic gesture of revenge by the betrayed, exotic lover; Hardy emphasises the arbitrary quality of this episode by the excision of a manuscript passage in which the Italianised American launches an earlier passionate attack upon Felice.²⁴ The eroticism of the affair takes on a peculiarly charged quality from the stylised, theatrical gestures in which it is enacted by *grande dame* and Don Juan:

They looked in each other's faces without uttering a word, an arch yet gloomy smile wreathing her lips. Fitzpiers clasped her hanging hand, and, while she still remained in the same listless attitude, looking volumes into his eyes, he stealthily unbuttoned her glove, and stripped her hand of it by rolling back the gauntlet over her fingers so that it came off inside out. He then raised her hand to his mouth, she still reclining passively, watching him as she might have watched a fly upon her dress (p. 236).

The theatricality is all the more prominent in that the scene is recounted from the point of view of its audience, the watching Melbury.

But for the greater part of the text, the self-parodic, over-written quality of this relationship is counterpointed by the unironic deployment of literary allusions in the narratives of Giles and Marty. The incompatible elements of genre and tone displace one another serially, each allowing another in turn only a brief dominance. Between the death of Giles and Marty's final elegy for him, however, there intervenes the reconciliation of Grace and Fitzpiers in which the increasingly pronounced melodrama and farce culminate in the stagey humour of Grace's encounter with the man-trap. The placing of this ascendancy of the parodic in the narrative throws a subversively ironic light backward and forward upon the faithful lovers Giles and Marty. It also marks a shift in the narrative tone with respect to Grace – a shift away from Marty, her unironised duplicate at the pastoral-cum-tragic 'end' of her spectrum, and towards Felice, the intensely ironised melodramatic-cum-tragic duplicate. In a sense, *The Woodlanders*, like *The Return of the Native* before it, has alternative endings, appropriate to each of its competing genres. Marty's elegy is the pastoral ending, Grace's reunion with her husband the realist ending, and the death of Felice and the intervention of the man-trap are the melodramatic finale. The plethora of conclusions results, paradoxically enough, in irresolution.

The Woodlanders, for all the prominence of the traditional established fictional modes upon which it draws, is one of Hardy's most experimental novels. Its experimentation becomes clear in relation to such earlier works as *The Return of the Native*, where a single genre provides a dominant model that in the end determines the structure of the novel and enforces the eradication of the traces of competing modes. In *The*

Woodlanders, by contrast, there is a continuing multiplicity of generic elements almost to the end(s). The disjunction is most evident in the crucial figure of Grace Melbury, for whom no coherent personality or psyche capable of ordering those elements is constructed. Instead, the full play of ambiguities and tensions is enacted in the shifts and vacancies of her role as narrative centre. It is not by coincidence that Grace is also the focus of Hardy's most radical attempt so far to confront the issues of sexuality and marriage in his fiction; once again it is the problem of finding a satisfactory way of raising those questions in a narrative centred upon a woman that determines the formal characteristics of the work. Within the novel, however, it is possible to trace the emergence of two ways of writing that will come to prominence (though not to cohering dominance) in the central female characters of the two succeeding novels: the attempt, akin to the naturalist project, to give a 'scientifically' authoritative encompassment that will shape the narrative of Tess Durbeyfield, and the deflected and overtly partial mode of narration that will grant to Sue Bridehead an inaccessibility pushing beyond the emptiness of enigma.

NOTES

- 1 E.G. William H. Matchett, 'The *Woodlanders*, or Realism in Sheep's Clothing,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9 (1955), 241-61. For a discussion of the novel's early development, see Dale Kramer, 'Revisions and Vision: Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. Part I,' *Bulletin of New York Public Library*, 75 (1971), 195-230.
- 2 Cf. Peter J. Casagrande, 'The Shifted "Center of Altruism" in *The Woodlanders*: Thomas Hardy's Third "Return of a Native"', *ELH*, 38 (1971), 104-24.
- 3 Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (London, 1974), p. 156.
- 4 F. R. Southernington, in *Hardy's Vision of Man* (London, 1971), writes of 'a note of cynicism in the author's treatment of his plot' (p. 119); Albert J. Guerard, *Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories* (London, 1949), refers to the 'cynicism' of the ending (p. 52); and Mary Jacobus, 'Tree and Machine: *The Woodlanders*,' in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (London, 1979), finds a 'cynical determinism' in the latter part of the novel (p. 123).
- 5 That the symbolic quality of the image is in excess of any single 'meaning' is graphically demonstrated in the array of symbolic interpretations

- offered by critics: they include an outdated social and economic *status quo*, Grace's quality as a survivor, entrapment in social class and convention, woman, and sexuality. See, respectively, Gregor, *Great Web*, p. 163; John Holloway, 'Hardy's Major Fiction,' in *The Charted Mirror: Literary and Critical Essays* (London, 1960), p. 100; Mary M. Saunders, 'The Significance of the Man-Trap in *The Woodlanders*,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20 (1974-5), 529-31; Michael Steig, 'Art Versus Philosophy in Hardy: *The Woodlanders*,' *Mosaic*, 4, No 3 (1971), 109-10 and Geoffrey Thurley, *The Psychology of Hardy's Novels: The Nervous and the Statuesque* (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1975), p. 123.
- 6 See Dale Kramer, 'Revisions and Vision, Part I,' p. 221, and 'Part II. Years to Maturity,' *Bulletin of New York Public Library*, 75 (1971), 257-8.
 - 7 Jacobus, 'Tree and Machine,' pp. 121-2.
 - 8 'Roger Dattall' [A. A. Eaglestone], *The Plain Man and the Novel*, Discussion Book Series (London, 1940), p. 137.
 - 9 Cf. Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London, 1972), p. 157.
 - 10 See, respectively, David Lodge, Introduction, *The Woodlanders*, New Wessex Ed. (London, 1975), pp. 13-22; Robert Y. Drake, Jr. 'The *Woodlanders* as Traditional Pastoral,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 6 (1960), 251-7; and Charles E. May, 'Far from the Madding Crowd and *The Woodlanders*: Hardy's Grotesque Pastorals,' *English Literature in Transition*, 17 (1974), 147-58.
 - 11 Cf. George S. Fayen, Jr., 'Hardy's *The Woodlanders*: Inwardness and Memory,' *Studies in English Literature*, 1, No. 4 (1961), 90-1.
 - 12 Casagrande, 'The Shifted "Center"', p. 114.
 - 13 On contemporary responses to naturalism, see Clarence R. Decker, 'Zola's Literary Reputation in England,' *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 1140-53, and William C. Frierson, 'The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885-1895,' *PMLA*, 43 (1928), 533-50. On Hardy's relation to naturalism, see William B. Newton, 'Hardy and the Naturalists: their Use of Physiology,' *Modern Philology*, 49 (1951), 28-41, and 'Chance as Employed by Hardy and the Naturalists,' *Philological Quarterly*, 30 (1951), 154-75.
 - 14 Dale Kramer, *Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy* (London, 1975), pp. 92-110.
 - 15 Quoted by Carl J. Weber, 'Hardy and *The Woodlanders*,' *Review of English Studies*, 15 (1939), 332.
 - 16 The year is clearly identified as 1858 by a reference on p. 284 to "'the new statute, twenty and twenty-one Vic., cap. eighty-five'".
 - 17 H. C. Duffin, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels, The Poems and 'The Dynasts'*, 3rd ed. (1916; rpt. Manchester, 1937), p. 102.
 - 18 This phrase replaces in manuscript the original 'pure animism', which shares the misleading connotation of a philosophical system; see Kramer, 'Revisions and Vision. Part I,' p. 222.
 - 19 The phrase is inserted in revision between the serial version and first edition of the novel; see Kramer, 'Revisions and Vision. Part II,' p. 256.

- 20 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (London, 1971), p. 249.
- 21 Cf. Dale Kramer, *Forms of Tragedy*, p. 103.
- 22 Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 87.
- 23 Cf. Fayen, 'Inwardness and Memory,' pp. 85-8.
- 24 See Kramer, 'Revisions and Vision, Part I,' pp. 214-15.