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Howells and Hardy

by ELSA NETTELS

IN A LETTER dated May 14, 1902, Theodore Dreiser wrote to William Dean Howells to express

my spiritual affection for you—to offer my little tribute and acknowledge the benefit I have received from your work. . . . Thomas Hardy has provided some of this spiritual fellowship for me. Count Tolstoy yet some more. Of you three however I should not be able to choose, the spirit in each seeming to be the same, and the large, tender kindness of each covering all of the ills of life and voicing the wonder and yearning of this fitful dream, in what, to me, seems a perfect way. . . .¹

A striking feature of this letter is the linking of Howells and Hardy. At first glance, there might seem to be little common ground between Howells, who believed that fiction should capture the “light, impalpable, aerial essence” of the commonplace,² and Hardy, who insisted that “the real, if unavowed, purpose of fiction is to give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience.”³ The two writers, however, esteemed each other and valued their friendship. Indeed, Howells included Hardy among his “literary passions.” The two novelists also shared an enduring interest in certain important themes and they affirmed artistic principles by which Howells identified the international movement of Realism.

I

IN *My Literary Passions*, Howells acknowledged that he came “rather late” to his love of Thomas Hardy’s works.⁴ As Carl Weber shows in *Hardy in America*, there is no evidence that Howells read any work by Hardy while he was editor of the *Atlantic*.⁵ During the years of his editorship, highly favorable reviews of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Hand*

1. Quoted in Kenneth Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970), p. 137.

2. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Walter J. Meserve (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 202. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

3. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (New York: St. Martin's, 1962), p. 150.

4. *My Literary Passions* (New York: Greenwood, 1969), p. 248.

5. *Hardy in America: A Study of Thomas Hardy and His American Readers* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1946), pp. 56-57. During the years of Howells's editorship, the following novels by Hardy were published in America: *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1873), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), *Desperate Remedies* (1874), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), and *A Laodicean* (1881).

of *Ethelberta* appeared in the *Atlantic*, but apparently they did not move him to read Hardy's novels.⁶ In 1879, when Hardy expressed interest in having his novel, *The Trumpet-Major*, published in the *Atlantic* simultaneously with its appearance in England in *Good Words*, Howells made no offer of terms to Hardy.⁷ It remained for Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who succeeded Howells as editor of the *Atlantic*, to secure exclusive serial rights to Hardy's next novel, *Two on a Tower*, which ran in the *Atlantic* from May to December, 1882.⁸

Howells and Hardy first met in London, on June 25, 1883, at a dinner given by Edmund Gosse at the Savile Club. Howells's reference to his admiration of Hardy's works, made in a letter to Mark Twain a month later, suggests that by this time he had read at least several of Hardy's novels.⁹ He began with *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which, he later recalled, "revealed to me a fresh conception of the ever-womanly"¹⁰ and inspired his often-felt passion for a newly discovered writer. "As usual . . . I wished to read the books of no other author, and to read his books over and over."¹¹

In 1886, his first year of writing the "Editor's Study" for *Harper's Magazine*, Howells published his first criticism of Hardy, a favorable review of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. What Howells most admired was Hardy's mastery of characterization—his insight into the minds and souls of his people and his power to present them simply and directly, thus giving them the "living freshness" of characters never portrayed before.¹² *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Howells believed, placed Hardy in the first rank, with the greatest European novelists. Thereafter, Howells frequently named Hardy the greatest living English writer, the only one he included with the other writers he most prized: Tolstoy, James, Galdós, Valdés, Turgenev, and Balzac.¹³ In his "Editor's Study" of July, 1887, he compared *The Woodlanders* to the fiction of Charles Reade and George Eliot, judging Hardy superior to Reade in management of plot, greater than George Eliot in his intimate knowledge of nature and rustic life.¹⁴ In equally strong terms he praised *A Group of Noble Dames* for its "perfect relief" and "absolute veracity," declaring it unsurpassed by any of Hardy's earlier works.¹⁵

6. *The Atlantic Monthly*, XXXII (October 1873), 500; XXXVIII (August 1876), 244. The reviewer dismissed *Desperate Remedies* as "hardly worth reading," its plot a "wearisome confusion of motives and purposes." *The Atlantic Monthly*, XXXIV (August 1874), 231.

7. Hardy's letter is printed in Weber, pp. 56-57.

8. See Weber, pp. 72-84, for a detailed account of the publication of *Two on a Tower* in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

9. Florence Emily Hardy, p. 160; *Selected Mark Twain-Howells Letters, 1872-1910*, ed. Frederick Anderson, William M. Gibson, Henry Nash Smith (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 211.

10. *Heroines of Fiction*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1901), II, 177.

11. *My Literary Passions*, p. 248.

12. "Editor's Study," *Harper's Magazine*, LXXIII (November 1886), 962.

13. "Criticism and Fiction," in *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, edited with Introductions and Notes by Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1959), p. 57. See also p. 39.

14. "Editor's Study," *Harper's Magazine*, LXXV (July 1887), 318.

15. "Editor's Study," *Harper's Magazine*, LXXXIII (September 1891), 641.

Howells's appreciation of fiction which fails to represent his own allegiance to the probable and the normal is revealed most strikingly in his review of *Jude the Obscure*, in which he countered the charges made against the novel. He admitted that the novel could be considered morbid and shocking but he insisted that, granting Hardy his characters and their circumstances, "one can only praise him for his truth." He noted that in *Jude* the grotesque replaces the humor of Hardy's earlier novels but he affirmed that the ugliness—far from reducing the power of the book—"at times heightens the pathos to almost intolerable effect." Acknowledging that the novel contains revolting scenes, he insisted that "they are deeply founded in the condition, if not in the nature of humanity." He noted that the novel had been read as an attack on marriage but believed it to demonstrate that marriage is the "sole solution of the question of Sex," even as it shows the degradation into which the marriage partners may fall. He admitted that the novel dealt with experience not treated before in Anglo-Saxon fiction and could not be recommended to all readers, but he insisted upon the "entire purity" of the book. "I do not believe that anyone can get the slightest harm from any passages in it."¹⁶

Howells's praise of *Jude* is similar to his praise of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which he first saw in 1894 and which he defended against charges similar to those directed at *Jude*.¹⁷ In both *Jude* and *Ghosts* he found the profundity and the unity of Greek tragedy—"the classic singleness of means as well as the classic singleness of motive."¹⁸ He judged *Jude* as he judged *Ghosts*, the supreme work of its creator. Affirming that Hardy had reached "the height of his power" in *Jude*, Howells endorsed the novel in the strongest terms: "No greater and truer book has been written in our time or any."¹⁹

In later years, Howells continued to champion Hardy in essays and reviews and to extol him as the greatest English writer of the day. After praising William Lyon Phelps for his literary criticism, Howells added, "I should have put Hardy above all the other living English."²⁰ At least twice he compared Hardy to Shakespeare, when he judged Hardy "a humorist who may almost stand with Shakespeare himself" and when he likened Hardy's use of dialect to Shakespeare's.²¹ He expressed to Hardy a particular love of his poetry: "certain things of yours haunt my ear with their matchless music."²² He reviewed two volumes of Hardy's

16. "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIX (December 7, 1895), 1156.

17. See "A Second Apparition of 'Ghosts,'" *Literature*, n.s. 1 (June 1899), 529-30; "A Question of Propriety," *Literature*, n.s. 1 (July 7, 1899), 609.

18. "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIX (December 7, 1895), 1156.

19. *Heroines of Fiction*, II, 209.

20. Letter to William Lyon Phelps, March 9, 1910. By permission, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

21. "A Modern Italian View of Humor," *The North American Review*, CLXXIII (November 1901), 716; "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIX (June 22, 1895), 581.

22. Letter of Howells to Hardy, March 25, 1912. Quoted by permission of W. W. Howells and the Trustees of the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection in the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, England. Reproduction requires these permissions.

poems, praising them for their truth and unique tragic beauty.²³ In the two chapters he devoted to Hardy in *Heroines of Fiction*, Howells again stressed the uniqueness of Hardy, whose mature works, without derivative elements, showed the influence of no other writer.²⁴

Howells not only admired Hardy's works; he often saw the English scene through the glass of Hardy's fiction. At Plymouth, his guide reminded him of a Hardy character; there he also saw soldiers with their girls, one a "hard-mouthed, red-cheeked, black-eyed girl, coarsely flirting, like Arabella in 'Jude the Obscure.'" ²⁵ At a railway station in Wells he talked to an old man who seemed the living counterpart of Granfer Cattle in *The Return of the Native*. He imagined houses seen from the wall at Chester as domiciles of Hardy's heroines. A forest through which he rode on his way to London recalled the "wild and primitive" scenes of Hardy's fiction. Driving from Bath, he observed "a sort of tranter's wagon somewhere out of Hardy's enchanted pages."²⁶

Hardy never wrote an essay about Howells, and his praise of Howells was more measured than Howells's praise of him. But Hardy on several occasions expressed appreciation of Howells's work. In a letter thanking Howells for his review of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy concluded, "Your powers of work often strike me as being amazing, and none of it ever bears the marks of haste. I trust that you may long maintain such vigour, with such finish and truth of observation."²⁷ When Howells as editor of *The Cosmopolitan* asked Hardy for a story, Hardy in his letter regretting that he had nothing to send praised the evocation of New York in Howells's current serial, *The World of Chance*, and commended Howells for portraying America "rather than alien countries, as so many able American writers insist on doing."²⁸

In a letter honoring Howells on his seventy-fifth birthday, Hardy referred to their friendship of thirty years, praised Howells for recognizing "the truth that poetry is the heart of literature," and declared: "I do not remember that a single word except of praise—always well deserved—has ever been uttered on your many labors in the field of American literature."²⁹ (Apparently Hardy had not read or had forgotten the English critics' attacks on Howells for his criticism of Dickens and

23. "Some New Volumes of Verse," *The North American Review*, CLXXIV (January 1902), 136-44; "Some New Volumes of Verse," *The North American Review*, CXCI (May 1910), 652-58.

24. *Heroines of Fiction*, II, 193-94.

25. Letter to Elinor Mead Howells, March 13, 1904. By permission of W. W. Howells and the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Republication requires these permissions.

26. *London Films and Certain Delightful English Towns* (New York: Harper, 1905), pp. 343, 455, 373, 324.

27. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, 2 vols., ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), I, 156.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 266-67.

29. *Harper's Weekly*, LVI (March 9, 1912), 33.

Thackeray.)³⁰ According to Hamlin Garland, who visited Hardy in 1923, three years after Howells's death, Hardy, in praising Howells, affirmed that "the grace and charm of his style, of his English, is quite unmatched."³¹

II

HOWELLS's references to the truth of Hardy's work and Hardy's reference to the "truth of observation" in Howells indicate the most important bond between the two writers and the most important artistic principle on which they agreed. According to Howells, one asks first of any work of literature: "Is it true—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?"³² Hardy, in answering those who objected to his "pessimism," denied that his books illustrated any doctrine: "There is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics—which is truth . . . conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize."³³ He identified "truth of feeling and action" as the most important virtue of a novel and believed that the novelist must satisfy the reader's "quest for a true exhibition of man."³⁴ To Howells as well, the truthful revelation of character was the novelist's most important task. "The author's highest function is to find out the truth about his characters, their circumstances, their motives, their purpose, or in other words realize them."³⁵

Both Hardy and Howells believed that truth is the creator of beauty and morality in fiction, that the novel which truthfully portrays life cannot be immoral or injurious, whatever its subject. Given truth to human nature, "which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry," Howells asserted, "the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak."³⁶ Likewise, Hardy denied that readers can be harmed by fiction they perceive as truth. Novels which "impress the reader with the inevitableness of character and environment in working out destiny, whether that destiny be just or unjust, enviable or cruel, must have a sound effect . . . upon a healthy mind."³⁷

To Howells, *truth* was virtually synonymous with *realism*, which he defined as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment

30. See Edwin H. Cady, *The Road to Realism: The Early Years, 1837-1885, of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 218-21.

31. Hamlin Garland, *Afternoon Neighbors: Further Excerpts from a Literary Log* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 90.

32. "Criticism and Fiction," p. 49. See also pp. 15, 43, 46-47, 69.

33. "General Preface to the Novels and Poems," *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences*, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 49.

34. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, pp. 122, 115.

35. "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIX (May 11, 1895), 436.

36. "Criticism and Fiction," p. 49.

37. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," p. 118.

of material.”³⁸ To Hardy, on the other hand, *realism*—“an unfortunate, an ambiguous word”—connoted mechanical imitation of the external world, or “copyism.” When Hardy states that “the most devoted apostle of realism . . . cannot escape . . . the exercise of art in his labour,” he implies that realism is opposed to his own conception of art as the shaping of experience into a new reality—“the making of a thing or situation out of nothing that ever was before.”³⁹ He believed that art is scientific in that it must be grounded in a “comprehensive and accurate knowledge of realities.” But repeatedly he insisted that art is transformation, requiring “the exercise of the Daedalian faculty for selection and cunning manipulation.”⁴⁰ Art does not merely represent existing truth; art creates truth and therefore is “more truthful than truth.” To show that the greatest art is “more true” than history or nature, Hardy observed that only in the work of art, like *Hamlet* or *Othello*, does a group of people come together in one place, animated by motives and passions that conduce to a single end.⁴¹

Howells would not have denied the truth of Hardy’s observation, but his criticism suggests a conception of art as the representation of what exists rather than the creation of a new reality. Whereas Hardy set “art” in opposition to “realism,” Howells celebrated realism as the highest form of art because it faithfully reflects the artist’s and the reader’s knowledge of life. But Howells no less than Hardy recognized the importance of the artist’s shaping hand, the necessity of selection and arrangement. He not only defended the substance of *Jude the Obscure* but praised its “artistic excellence” evident in the construction of the novel, in which every incident “seem[s] necessary for the circumstances and the characters.”⁴² The performance of the actors in Lorimer Stoddard’s stage version of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and the unity of the play itself—“an infrangible chain of causes and consequences”—proved to Howells that “art and truth are forever bound up in each other.”⁴³ In championing realism, Howells argued no less strongly than Hardy against mere reproduction of surface facts. “When realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too.”⁴⁴

In distinguishing between a transcript of material fact and the creation of truth, between writers who “map” life and those who “picture” it, both Hardy and Howells distinguished between ephemeral facts and permanent universal truths. In Hardy’s words, “To distinguish truths

38. “Criticism and Fiction,” pp. 15, 38.

39. “The Science of Fiction,” in *Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings*, pp. 136, 134.

40. “The Science of Fiction,” p. 134. For analysis of the mimetic and expressionistic elements in Hardy’s aesthetic theory, see Lawrence O. Jones, “Imitation and Expression in Thomas Hardy’s Theory of Fiction,” *Studies in the Novel*, VII (Winter 1975), 507–25.

41. “The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” p. 118.

42. “Life and Letters,” *Harper’s Weekly*, XXXIX (December 7, 1895), 1156.

43. “Life and Letters,” *Harper’s Weekly*, XLI (March 20, 1897), 291.

44. “Criticism and Fiction,” p. 15.

which are temporary from truths which are eternal . . . is of vital importance."⁴⁵ Both writers further believed that the eternal and the universal can be revealed in the portrayal of people of a particular time and place. Hardy observed that the scenes of his novels were confined to the region of Wessex but argued that the "elementary passions" vibrate as strongly in English villages as in European palaces and declared that his characters "were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place . . . beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal."⁴⁶

Likewise, Howells defended American fiction which confines itself to one region, arguing that the so-called "narrowness" of such writers as Sarah Orne Jewett, Edward Eggleston, and Charles Egbert Craddock was a virtue, not a defect. A work depicting a New England village, a farm in the Indiana back country, or a settlement in the Tennessee mountains might be as "broad as life, for each man is a microcosm." If writers are true to the localities they depict, they are "true to human experience everywhere" for "human nature is the same in all environments."⁴⁷

The most easily marked difference in Howells's and Hardy's theories of fiction is seen in the relative value the two writers place on the common and the uncommon in fiction. Howells's novels contain extraordinary or sensational events—e.g. the burning of Silas Lapham's house, the shooting of Conrad Dryfoos in the streetcar strike (*A Hazard of New Fortunes*), the railroad accidents in which Julius Peck (*Annie Kilburn*) and James Nevil (*The Shadow of a Dream*) die. But Howells held that such events should be no more prominent in fiction than they are in life, that fiction should capture the "delicate and elusive charm of the average."⁴⁸ His one criticism of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was that Henchard's tragedy springs from an event so uncommon as the sale of his wife.

In praising the lyrics of the Dorset poet, William Barnes, Hardy recognized the power of art to illuminate the commonest things of everyday life.⁴⁹ But he also insisted that fiction pleases the reader by satisfying his love of the uncommon. He identified one group of his works as "Novels of Ingenuity" which "show a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events."⁵⁰ He believed that the novelist, to create both interest and a sense of reality, must unite the uncommon and the ordinary, and he criticized writers who he thought failed to achieve the necessary balance. "Howells and those of his school forget that a story

45. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," p. 118.

46. "General Preface," p. 46.

47. "Criticism and Fiction," p. 67; *The Atlantic Monthly*, XLI (January 1878), 140; *Literature*, n.s. 1 (April 7, 1899), 290.

48. *Literature*, II (July 2, 1898), 759.

49. "An Unsigned Review of *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*," in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, p. 96.

50. "General Preface," p. 45.

must be striking enough to be worth telling. Therein lies the problem—to reconcile the average with that uncommonness which alone makes it natural that a tale or experience would dwell in the memory and induce repetition.”⁵¹

The difference in the practice of the two novelists can be seen if one compares their treatment of a similar situation, although the comparison brings together one of Howells's most important novels, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and a minor story by Hardy, “Alicia's Diary” (1887). Both story and novel portray two sisters who love the same man. Both the younger sisters—Irene Lapham in *Silas Lapham* and Caroline in “Alicia's Diary”—are beautiful immature dependent girls who look to others for their ideas and opinions. The older sisters—Penelope Lapham and Alicia—are intelligent, spirited, and independent, fond of reading and conversation. In both works, the younger sister meets and falls in love with an attractive young man while she is away from home on a vacation. When the young man meets the older sister, he is at once charmed by her wit and intelligence. Both older sisters try to efface themselves to give the younger sister every chance. As Penelope secludes herself in her room with a book when Tom Corey calls, until Irene, at Tom's request, summons her to join them, so Alicia tries to stay in the background when Charles de la Feste comes to their house. “I had taken a volume of *Modern Painters* from the bookcase to occupy myself with, while leaving the two lovers to themselves; but he would include me in his audience, and I was obliged to lay the book aside.”⁵² In each work, the young man declares his love to the older sister, but although she returns his love, she is stricken with a sense of guilt and dismay. As Penelope declares to Tom, “It's the end of life for me, because I know now that I must have been playing false from the beginning,” (p. 221), so Alicia replies to Charles's proposal: “I cannot tell what I feel . . . except that this seems terrible treachery; and every moment that I stay with you here makes it worse” (p. 105).

From this point, the stories move to completely different ends, one probable and unremarkable, the other sensational and unlikely. Guided by the minister, David Sewell, the Laphams tell Irene the truth; she survives the terrible blow to her pride and her hopes, and eventually Tom and Penelope are married. When Alicia observes that Charles's neglect of her sister has so undermined Caroline's health that her death seems inevitable, she persuades Charles to undergo a mock marriage ceremony with Caroline to cheer the dying girl in her last hours. (One thinks of Kate Croy's scheme in *The Wings of the Dove*.) Alicia promises to marry Charles if her sister dies; when Caroline recovers, Alicia insists that Charles marry Caroline in a legal ceremony. He yields, declaring

51. Florence Emily Hardy, p. 239.

52. *A Changed Man, The Waiting Supper, and Other Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 101. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

that he "will not answer for the consequences" (p. 124), and a few hours after their wedding he is found dead in the pool of a weir.

The Rise of Silas Lapham attests to Howells's faith in the power of people to make wise decisions. "Alicia's Diary" shows that Hardy believed with Robert Burns that

The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
For promised joy.

III

THE RESOLUTION of the crises in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* suggests another link between Howells and Hardy: their illustration of Utilitarian ethics in their portrayal of characters forced to choose between conflicting interests or obligations. As Donald Pizer has observed, the principle of the "economy of pain" invoked by Sewall as "the only possible good"—that "one suffer instead of three, if none is to blame" (241)—is consonant with the Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, whose standard of the right—"the happiness of all concerned"—is also upheld by Silas Lapham when he suffers bankruptcy rather than deceive others.⁵³ Likewise, Hardy conceived the conflicts of characters in Utilitarian terms, referring in two novels to Bentham and elsewhere suggesting the philosophy of the greatest happiness to the greatest number. In their treatment of the theme, Howells and Hardy reveal different attitudes towards the society of which their characters are part and different views of the relation of the character's choice to his ultimate fate. Comparison also helps to explain why Howells repeatedly praised Hardy's fiction for its truth.

Hardy's awareness of Utilitarian ethics is most evident in his portrayal of those characters who themselves define a conflict in which they must weigh benefit to themselves against benefit to others. Cytherea Graye, the heroine of Hardy's first published novel, *Desperate Remedies*, recognizes such a conflict when she is sought in marriage by a sensual adventurer, Aeneas Manston, whom she distrusts and fears but who promises, if she marries him, to provide medical care for her brother stricken with bone disease. She yields to Manston's will but after the wedding ceremony she confesses to her brother that she still loves her first suitor, a young architect, Edward Springrove. When her brother instructs her that her duty to society requires her to live as a good wife to her husband, she confesses the difficulty of reconciling conflicting obligations: "It is difficult to adjust our outer and inner life with perfect honesty to all! Though it may be right to care more for the

53. "The Ethical Unity of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*," *American Literature*, XXXII (November 1960), 322-27.

benefit of the many than for the indulgence of your own single self, when you consider that the many, and duty to them, only exist to you through your own existence, what can be said?"⁵⁴ She goes on to assert that society actually cares little about what one does and that no one can know what another sacrifices in doing what society regards as one's duty. Had she defended herself by Mill's ethics, she would have argued that acts which violate the moral principles of the doer cannot serve as a general guide to action and so cannot benefit society as a whole.

Cytherea submits to the pressure of convention represented by her brother and embarks with Manston on their wedding journey. Before the day ends, however, Manston is apprehended for his past crimes. Eventually he is jailed and commits suicide, leaving Cytherea free to marry Springrove. Like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, she is spared by the contrivances of the plot the consequences of her decision. Thus the question of the morality of self-sacrifice becomes a minor theme, not a central issue of the novel.

The heroine of *The Hand of Ethelberta* likewise must attempt to reconcile conflicting desires and claims when Lord Mountclere, an aged voluptuary of noble family but scandalous reputation, seeks to marry her. Here, however, the conflict is of opposing feelings within the heroine herself—between her longing for social rank and power and her revulsion against marriage solely for material gain; between her love for a poor, obscure music teacher and her wish to aid her impoverished family by a great marriage. Unconsciously seeking to justify marriage to Mountclere, Ethelberta reads in a "well-known treatise on Utilitarianism" [Chapter II of Mill's *Utilitarianism*]: "The happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned."⁵⁵ By what Hardy terms a "sorry but unconscious misapplication of sound and wide reasoning" (p. 319), Ethelberta concludes that both the welfare of others and her own well-being compel her to marry Mountclere. Whether or not she is corrupted by her "distorted Benthamism" (p. 321), Hardy does not say. The question, "Was the moral incline upward or down?" (p. 321), remains unanswered. Evidently, Ethelberta remains morally unchanged. In keeping with the comic spirit of the book she marries Mountclere without apparent injury to herself, reforms her errant husband, and restores his bankrupt estates. As in *Desperate Remedies*, the theme of conflicting obligations is introduced but is not made integral to the resolution of the action.

The Utilitarian principle is most dramatically illustrated in *Two on a Tower*, in which the heroine's decision leads directly to her tragic fate. When Viviette, formerly Lady Constantine, discovers that her marriage

54. *Desperate Remedies* (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 278.

55. *The Hand of Ethelberta* (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 319. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

to an astronomer, Swithin St. Cleve, ten years her junior, is invalid because her first husband is discovered to have died in Africa after, not before, her marriage to Swithin, she must decide whether to allow Swithin to marry her in a legal ceremony, thus depriving him of an inheritance bequeathed him by his uncle on condition that he remain unmarried until he is twenty-five. Against her own interests—her desire to save her honor and to secure Swithin for her lawful husband, she weighs opposing considerations—that in marrying her, Swithin will forfeit money by which he could pursue his scientific studies, that from these studies might come discoveries of benefit to all mankind. She asks herself: "Ought a possibly large number, Swithin included, to remain unbenefited because the one individual to whom his release would be an injury chanced to be herself?"⁵⁶

After prolonged mental struggle, she rises above self-interest and insists that Swithin leave her to pursue his studies, not to return until his twenty-fifth birthday. He yields to her will and when she sees him years later the shock of conflicting emotions—anguish on perceiving that Swithin no longer loves her, joy when he declares that he will marry her—causes her death.

The simplest application—or misapplication—of Utilitarian ethics made by a Hardy character occurs in the story of two boys, *Our Exploits at West Poley*. The narrator, Leonard, aged thirteen, and his cousin Steve, several years older, discover within a cave of the Mendip Hills the source of a stream that supplies water to the village of West Poley. Unwittingly, in their play, they divert the stream to East Poley, depriving the other village of its water supply. Steve justifies their act to Leonard on the grounds that the population of East Poley is more than twice that of West Poley: "We've done more good than harm . . . the people in East Poley that we've made happy are two hundred and fifty, and there are only a hundred in this parish, even if all of 'em are made miserable."⁵⁷

The narrator, thinking this "problem in utilitarian philosophy" better suited "to the genius of Jeremy Bentham than to me" (p. 32), makes no judgment. Ultimately, both villages suffer from the boys' exploits, the stream is finally returned to its original course, and a village sage advises the boys that all clever actions "should be carefully weighed with a view to their utility before they are begun" (p. 109).

Even in his boys' story, Hardy creates a situation which does not permit a solution in simple numerical terms. In his novels, characters are not only faced with duties and interests difficult or impossible to reconcile; the consequences of their decisions lie outside their control and may or may not seem morally consistent with these decisions. Cytherea

56. *Two on a Tower* (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 257.

57. *Our Exploits at West Poley*, with an introduction by R. L. Purdy (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 32. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

Graye, the heroine of a melodrama, allows herself to marry a man she knows to be evil but is spared dishonor and is eventually united with the man she loves. Viviette, the heroine of a romantic tragedy, makes an unselfish decision which leads to her betrayal of another person and to both their deaths. Like Cytherea, Tess Durbeyfield allows her sense of duty to her family to force her into actions repugnant to her but the result is her murder of her seducer and her own death.

Like Hardy, Howells treats the theme of conflicting interests in a variety of ways. In several of his later novels, he questioned whether the moral nature of human motives and actions determines their consequences. Through Basil March in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* he registered his sense of the economic "chance world" where life seems determined by the free play of forces, godless and lawless. But in such novels as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *The Minister's Charge*, and *The Son of Royal Langbrith*, Howells presents his characters with one alternative which is unquestionably the right one and which when chosen leads to their good. Characters such as Hermia and Nevil in *The Shadow of a Dream*, who sacrifice personal happiness out of a morbid sense of guilt, may end tragically, but those like the Laphams, who act for others' good, while they do not escape suffering, ultimately enter upon a life which promises their happiness. And whatever the fate of individual characters, Howells, unlike Hardy, affirms through his morally enlightened characters an ideal of conduct and a conception of society by which all actions can be judged.

The difference can perhaps best be appreciated if one considers *A Modern Instance*, the novel of Howells most similar in mood, theme, and resolution to Hardy's fiction. A study of degeneration and failure, *A Modern Instance* in a number of ways resembles *Jude the Obscure*, the work of Hardy that Howells most admired. Both novels depict the collapse of marriages of characters morally or temperamentally unsuited to one another. The marriage of Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord in *A Modern Instance* and the marriages of Jude and Arabella, Sue Bridehead and Phillotson are the result of decisions made impulsively, in the heat of passion or jealousy. Both Hardy and Howells recognize the impossibility of their characters forever feeling and doing what they profess in their marriage vows. In fact, marriage brings out the weakness or perversity of one or both partners in each relationship. The two characters who separate themselves from the women they love—Ben Halleck in *A Modern Instance* and the schoolmaster Phillotson in *Jude*—suffer prolonged frustration and illness.

Both novels present a debate between characters who uphold law and convention and those who argue that in marriage individual feelings supersede law, that the binding of marriage partners against their will is abhorrent. In *A Modern Instance*, the debate is precipitated by Halleck, who loves Bartley's wife Marcia, but is forbidden by his moral prin-

ciples from declaring his love to her, even after Bartley deserts her. Halleck's friend, a lawyer, Eustace Atherton, defines what he considers Halleck's obligations to society. When Halleck comes to Atherton two years after Bartley deserts Marcia and argues that she has the right to seek a divorce, Atherton condemns Halleck for countenancing divorce, warning him that he will undermine the social order if he makes himself an example "in support of conditions that tempt people to marry with a mental reservation."⁵⁸ Later, to his wife, Atherton argues that Halleck, known as a man of principle, has a duty to society to live as an example of rectitude, that to encourage in Marcia thought of escape through divorce would be to commit "a crime against her and against society" (p. 416).

In Atherton's conversations with his wife and Halleck, Howells grapples with a problem similar to that argued by the characters in *Jude*. As Atherton reminds Halleck of his duty to society, so Gillingham, the friend of Phillotson, advises him that he must conform to his position as a teacher of youth, must remember "its effect as such upon the morals of the town," and therefore must refuse to give his wife her freedom to live with another man. "If people did as you want to do," he tells Phillotson, "there'd be a general domestic disintegration. The family would no longer be the social unit."⁵⁹

The arguments of Gillingham and Atherton are essentially the same but Hardy and Howells, in their portrayal of these characters, reveal different attitudes towards the social order for which the characters speak. Gillingham, whose one role is to uphold conventional ideas about marriage, is a minor figure. Hardy does not satirize him but he does not endorse his view or judge others by it. Hardy's sympathies are with Phillotson, who, having decided that he will not hold his wife against her will, is convinced that his conclusion was "indubitably the true one," and tells Gillingham, "I wouldn't be cruel to her in the name of the law" (p. 283). Atherton, a more fully developed character, expresses one of Howells's most important ideas, the principle of complicity, which Silas Lapham affirms when he refuses to profit at the expense of others. Atherton admits to his wife that the Hubbards' ruin repels him because it "sins against order," but he insists that neither he, Atherton, nor his wife can escape the consequences of others' deeds. What injures one member of society injures all members. An evil act not only corrupts the doer and injures the immediate victim but weakens the whole society. "We're all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state. . . . Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together in Christian society" (p. 418).

58. *A Modern Instance*, ed. George N. Bennett (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 398. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

59. *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Harper, 1895), pp. 279, 280. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

Atherton does not refer to Utilitarianism, but the social unity of which he speaks is conceived by Utilitarian philosophers as the ultimate sanction of the principles of utility and the end to which all individual happiness should conduce. According to Mill's essay, from which Hardy quotes, Utilitarian morality draws its strength from "the social feelings of mankind—the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures." The progress of civilization, Mill states, is measured by the growth in the people of the knowledge that they are all members of one body, that "the interests of others are their own interests."⁶⁰

Clearly Howells gives much more weight and substance to his character who censures deviation from society's codes than Hardy gives to his. In the final scenes of *A Modern Instance*, it is true, Howells undercuts the authority of Atherton by letting the lawyer enunciate the principle of complicity while sitting in the "luxurious diningroom" (p. 413) of his house on the Back Bay, drinking the finest tea sweetened "to perfection" with the richest cream (pp. 417–18). But Howells never repudiated the Utilitarian ideal Atherton defines and he allows Atherton, whose last words, "'Ah, I don't know! I don't know!'" end the novel, to express Howells's sense that the complexity of human life does not admit of simple judgments.

Comparison of the roles and the relative importance of Atherton and Gillingham reveals the fundamental difference in Howells's and Hardy's treatment of characters in relation to society. Hardy's central characters such as Jude and Tess are victims of the established order, outcasts, who, despite their weaknesses, engage the reader's sympathy in their struggle against class barriers and repressive codes of Victorian society. Howells's characters like the Hubbards also suffer from poverty and social prejudice but Bartley is the embodiment of the corruptions of his society as well as the victim of them, and all the characters are conceived in relation to a concept of social unity, which, although not yet realized, exists as an ideal to which they should aspire. To set forth this ideal, Howells creates representatives of the social order, like the lawyer, Atherton, and the minister, Sewell, who, though fallible, express an enlightened view of conduct against which the decisions and actions of all the characters can be measured.

Howells's moral judgments separate him from Hardy, but in developing the concept of complicity, Howells comes to share to some extent Hardy's vision of characters as victims. Although Howells and his characters appeal to will and conscience, although they assume the power of the person to recognize and choose the good, at the same time Howells's belief that all members of a society bear responsibility for its evil relieves the individual person of the full burden of guilt. Without denying that a person is morally responsible for his acts, Howells, in his later novels,

60. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism with Critical Essays*, ed. Samuel Gorovitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 34, 35.

affirmed the power of environment to shape the person, whose deeds reflect the nature of the society which has helped to form him. Sewall, in *The Minister's Charge*, asserts that spectators as well as malefactors are responsible for social evil. "It was not the tyrant who oppressed, it was the wickedness that had made him possible."⁶¹ In *The Quality of Mercy*, the playwright Brice Maxwell argues that the defalcator Northwick is the victim of the false standards of a corrupt society, that he is the symptom, not the cause, of disease in the whole social body. "It behooved society to consider how far it was itself responsible, which it might well do without ignoring the responsibility of the criminal."⁶² Basil March, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, likewise insists that "conditions make character," that people struggle for money and position because society holds up these things as the highest good.⁶³

In his growing sense of characters as the victims of social injustice and inequity Howells moved close to Hardy's conception of human life shaped by forces beyond the power of the individual person to control. Significantly, however, Howells, in his analysis of Hardy's novels, never identifies fate or chance as a determining force in the characters' lives. Instead, he analyzes Hardy's characters as victims of social conditions, the product of human, not supernatural, purposes. In his review of the play *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for instance, he sees the characters as fated by the state of society, which virtually forces the "recklessly rich" like Alec D'Urberville and the "desperately poor" like Tess to sin against each other. "You perceive that these sinners cannot be held primarily responsible for their sin, that the guilt of this must first be laid at the door of conditions. . . . The situation is the inevitable result of the barbarism of our economy which mars the will for good at every moment when life's need is confronted with its means."⁶⁴

Hardy presents his characters as victims of chance, of natural laws, of the hypocrisy and cruelty of Victorian codes, and above all, of a First Cause acting through the blind will of Fate. Howells stresses economic inequality as the primary evil by which both rich and poor are victimized. But both novelists portray character to some extent determined, shaped by forces beyond their control. At the same time, both novelists endow their characters with powers of resistance. Characters like Tess, Jude, and Henchard are not easily crushed but struggle against circumstances and impulses which eventually destroy them. Howells gives a number of his characters the power to recognize the good, to analyze the evils of the social order if they cannot eradicate them, and to place the common good above selfish interests.

61. *The Minister's Charge or The Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker*, ed. Howard Munford (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), p. 341.

62. *The Quality of Mercy*, ed. James P. Elliott (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 125-26.

63. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, ed. Everett Carter (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), p. 437.

64. "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, XLI (March 20, 1897), 291.

Given Howells's growing concern with the corrupting effects of economic and social inequality and given Hardy's conception of the forces which thwart his characters, it is not surprising that Dreiser felt a sense of spiritual kinship with these two novelists. To the author of *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *An American Tragedy*, the characters of Hardy and Howells, endowed with energy and the questing spirit, subject to forces and conditions which forbid dogmatic censure of their errors and failures, would have exemplified his own ideal of truth in art.

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