Joan Durbeyfield Writes to Margaret Saville: An Intermediary Reader in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles

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by REUBEN J. ELLIS

How I wish there was enough material left, covering our friend's last strange days, so that it would not be necessary to interrupt with narrative the flow of the letters he left behind.
"Editor"
The Sorrows of Young Werther

MOST READERS do not share the "Editor's" sentiments. Lacunae in the documentation tempt Goethe's Editor away from his avowed neutrality, draw out into the open what had previously been only an implicit narrative filter, and complicate the novel with an exciting plural vocality. But my interest here with this Editor's remark extends only to my wish to lift it from where it belongs, place it in another novel, and force it to its own blurred extremes. Just how much can narrative "interrupt" an epistolary structure before the coherence of that structure breaks down, evolves morphologically into another rhetorical mode? How far can we stretch our notion of the epistolary novel? Can we investigate a novel we do not normally think of as operating in that mode by overlaying characteristic attributes of epistolary narrative? How thoroughly can we meddle with the rules of Richardson's handbook?

Actually, I do not have any intention of answering these questions. But I want them to accumulate on the periphery of this discussion, and I hope that my observations might raise them in a new way. What I propose here is that we can make a certain sense out of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*[1] by considering it as an extensively, strenuously interrupted series of letters. The most significant result of such a reading I take to be the necessity of an implicit imaginative center of reference for the fifteen letters in the novel, an "intermediary reader" who acts as fictional audience for these letters and in so doing enhances our understanding of the eschatology of Hardy's evolution of Will.

I

EPIGRAPHS invite us to make too much of them. They stand at the begin-

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1. I am using here the Norton Critical Edition of *Tess*, ed. Scott Elledge, 2nd. ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), taken from the 1912 Wessex Edition. Pagination of all quotations from *Tess* I include parenthetically in text.

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ning of the text, usually set off at a respectably formal physical distance in the book, as a kind of epitaph-in-advance to what follows. They seem to want to wrap it all up, to offer a concise, text-specific *ABC of Reading* in a voice that speaks from outside the text — not, in other words, the voice of the narrator, the implied narrator, the implied author, the author, or anyone else on the production crew. In other words, epigraphs want to usurp the authority of the narrative voice, not only by getting the first word in, but by attempting to familiarize for us the text that follows, by advancing a pattern for understanding, a fugal announcement to be completed and fulfilled in a different voice. They pretend to deny Gayatri Spivak's assertion that "each act of reading the text is a preface to the next,"[2] but inevitably complicate themselves with their own language to confuse the origin of the voice with which they themselves speak.

When Hardy begins *Tess* with a scrupulously edited moment from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* — ". . . Poor wounded name! My bosom / Shall lodge thee" (I, ii, 114, 115), I want to let that epigraph do its job; I want to let it take control, let it become our interpretive heuristic. I want, in short, to test its applicability to the novel and notice what effect it might have on our reading.

Hardy draws his epigraph from an intriguing discussion in Shakespeare's play of letters and their signification. In a rage of frustration, Julia has just torn to pieces a letter from Proteus, her suitor. Her comments describe the scraps of paper lying on the floor initially as an organically whole signifying structure — as a "cut paper" image of collage cubism — that does not, however, carry with it the meaning it might have had before she tore it apart. In fact, its prior meaning is unrecoverable, and Julia can only sort through the disordered scraps of paper to find isolated words, stray expressions, notably: "love-wounded Proteus," the "poor wounded name" that Hardy borrows for his epigraph. With the fear that at any moment a wind may scatter the shredded letter, she finally locates what had been the letter's statement of address, "Poor forlorn Proteus, passionate Proteus, / To the sweet Julia," which she folds in half to invite their two names to "kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will." Unable to reconstruct the original letter, she creates a new letter by conflating the old letter's addresser and addressee into a signification that has meaning for her, but may or may not accurately correspond to the message encoded in the original.

Out of all this Hardy pulls an epigraph, and J. Hillis Miller quickly fattens it with a point of origin, the artist as God surrogate whose "words constitute that capacious, compassionate bosom which offers lodging and repose to Tess's story and to all the other stories he tells."[3] And if the

2. Spivak's comment appears in her Translator's Preface to the English version of *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), p. xii.

3. J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 269.

author can substitute for God, why not so too the *right* side of Jakobson's schematic of the discourse situation?[4] Why not the reader? So with Shakespeare's scenario in the background, I take Hardy's epigraph more at the word of its context and suggest broadly that an important outcome of the novel can be the creation of one text out of another, more specifically that *Tess* offers up its letters as an alternative structure to the text as a whole and posits with them a communication system of addresser and addressee in which the addressee is an absence identifiable only by its silence, a Julia without lines, an altogether different sort of God surrogate.

II

THE NEW text that lies scattered like Julia's collage in *Tess* consists of fifteen letters, some actually displayed, some only referred to, distributed throughout the novel. As part of a matrix text, they propose to document certain narrated interactions between Hardy's characters with the "hard" evidence of the actual letters that passed between them. This sounds so innocent. But as we throw over *Tess* the "modern net" that Virginia Hyman refers to,[5] these seemingly straightforward letters can end up salted down in a somewhat unfamiliar hold. Let me mention how certain assumptions we have about epistolary novels and narrator-mediated novels interact to disturb the status of Hardy's letters.

All epistolary novels work within or near the premise that an "editor" has read and collected a file of letters. In his 1759 "Author's Preface" to *Clarissa*, Richardson steps from behind the silhouette of the editor's role to forfeit the illusion of an extrafictional reality for his collection of correspondence by describing them as a "History . . . given in a series of Letters." The reader recognizes Richardson's series as a narrative device for fiction rather than as a published file of actual, physical documents. But other epistolary novels operate from a position more deeply embedded within the premise of a reader/collector/editor; they begin with and seek to elaborate the illusion that they represent the faithful transcription of extant letters, rather than a story told by way of letters. Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, for example, purports to provide "the private correspondence of persons still living" and even advances a worried printer to warn its editor of the dangers of libel and the pillory.

By wanting to suppress the existence of an extrafictional agent, an author, epistolary novels change the status of the information they contain. They seem to grant a kind of direct communication, to allow a character an opportunity to "speak for himself" as Wayne Booth puts it,[6]

4. See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Politics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1960).
5. Virginia R. Hyman, *Ethical Perspectives in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 3–4.
6. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 323.

without a narrator's intervention or meddling. If direct monologue and dialogue permit the reader to temporarily suspend his awareness of the narrator, letters act as "stored" monologues, seemingly concrete, fixed, and invulnerable to the commentary of a narrator. As is also the case with monologue, and especially dialogue, because a character's reproduced letter is not addressed to the reader, it provides only a distanced, displaced interaction with that character, but it charges that distance with a special kind of tension; it creates a sense of stolen intimacy for the eavesdropping reader, an intimacy uninterrupted by a narrator. An epistolary structure as I am discussing it, then, pretends to shift the generative, authorial function inward, toward its own tropological devices, and lodges its organizing principle, the basis for the arrangement of its letters, in another trope, the editor, a kind of intermediary reader and collator, who must do his work before we can do ours.

Even if the eighteenth century regarded the epistolary form as a perfectly conventional, straightforward, and transparent narrative strategy, for us it undergoes a radical "problematization" (to borrow Foucault's idiom, if not his precise meaning), largely to the extent that its structural consistency and integrity break down through the invasion of the narrator's voice.

Goethe's *Werther* works as illustration of the process of this invasion. The novel begins immediately with Werther's letters, with only the sparest introductory comment from the letters' "Editor" that he had "collected" the story of Werther to "present it to you herewith, in the belief that you will thank me for it." But presumably, the Editor decides that indeterminacy would bring but small thanks. Since, we are told, Werther had left an incomplete documental record and had in fact purposefully destroyed many of his papers the night he died, the novel's Editor finally abandons his originally effaced position in the text and begins to speculatively fill in the gaps between letters. As a result, his status as a passive intermediary reader rather rapidly subordinates itself to his generative, story-telling function, until the novel changes shape altogether to become a narrated story punctuated only by isolated letters. This final shape is certainly the one we associate with *Tess* as well.

As readers, our perception of authority in a text tends to operate quantitatively. When we encounter a novel like *Tess* in which a narrator's voice predominantly controls the story that we take, we habitually privilege the authority (if not necessarily the veracity) of that voice over the scattered and displaced dramatized voices of the letters. In other words, regardless of whether we believe everything the narrator says, we acknowledge him as the primary source of information. The reader's experienced reality of the novel has very little to do with the mock-historical directness of epistolary structuring. When we read *Tess* we come across letters as documents embedded within a larger document. They function as brief evidential exhibits, dialectical elements, interrupters of the narrative, in

syntactic apposition to the narrator's introductory designations of them, so that, for example, the words represented to us as those written by Marian and Izz specify and elaborate the narrator's adjectivally judgmental identification of a "poor plain missive" (307).

But should reading *Tess* and its letters be quite so straightforward? Does our willingness to play the authority game of this narrator-mediated novel in fact require an uncomfortable suspension of understanding and scepticism? Certain physical facts about letters within a text, it seems to me, can excitingly complicate the simplicity of what the familiar voice of the narrator wants us to regard as merely assertion-support juxtapositioning moving between two levels of generality. Displayed letters, that is to say, letters that are made to look like letters, physically differentiated from the matrix narrative, introduce a two-level structure of textuality into a novel. The reading experience can become, to use Tony Bennett's expression, a "toing and froing"[7] between a text and a subtext that confuses the signification of the narrative. Specifically, when Hardy's narrator transcribes for us letters that passed between the novel's characters, he threatens our quantitatively-based assent to his authority; he advertises his own provisional status in the text and thereby acknowledges that his commentary appears only as a substitute for more concrete and direct documentation. The voice of the narrator, while still quantitatively and authoritatively dominant in the text, becomes less "real" than the exhibited letters, at a greater distance from character and event than the subtext of the letters.

But on the other hand, letters clearly have a syntagmatic dependence on the narrator, who functions as the tropal vehicle through which they are textually represented. For example, only through the refining and selecting capacity of Hardy's narrator do the letters reach the reader at all, a fact that surfaces in an especially obvious manner when the narrator provides only excerpted passages from two of the letters (306–7). An analogous illustration of this point comes with reference to the cinema. Communicating to the audience information in a letter is one of those "problem" moments in a narrative film, and to accomplish it, a film typically moves to a higher, more overt, level of artifice and convention, so that the audience "gets" what is in the letter in one of three more or less awkward ways: everything stops long enough for the audience to focus on the page and read the actual words over the addressee's shoulder, the audience hears a voice-over from the addresser while watching the addressee read, or the addressee for no very convincing reason reads the letter out loud.

While the transfer of information from *Tess*'s letters to the reader does not necessitate a movement between visual and written media, it does tend to undercut the narrator's controlled mode of presentation in the novel by

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7. Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (1979; rpt. London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 80.

highlighting the artificial role of the narrator in the signifying system. It objectifies the novel's letters by setting them apart from the rest of the text and as a result begs the question of the narrator's status in the novel by seemingly allowing him possession of letters that no single person could have. It corroborates the possibility that the narrator has simply invented the contents of the letters and consequently makes the concomitant objectification of the narrator a disorienting partial success.

Let me explain this effect in another way. In moving his aesthetics toward praxis, Valentin Vološinov emphasized the *dialogic* nature of the linguistic sign and extratextual reality, how words take account of utterances to which they respond and utterances which respond to them[8] in a kind of signifying "field." We can imagine Vološinov's dialogic field reduced and confined within *Tess* as an interaction of mutual verification and challenge between the narrator-mediated text and the subtext of the letters, an interaction founded on *inter*textual otherness, discreteness, on "boundaries" that establish a basis for us to atomize the novel into two very distinct components, *Tess-1*, the narrative matrix of the novel, and *Tess-2*, the letters. This is a distinction, to continue the analogy to Gestalt psychology that my terminology has been suggesting, based on *interest*,[9] and my purpose now will be to stress the novel's boundaries and in so doing to extravagantly *open* the *gestalt* of *Tess* to artificially reorganize it on the basis of that specific interest in the fragmented information of letters articulated by the novel's epigraph, that is to say, an organizational nexus which collects the novel's letters and wants to read them for themselves alone. Bear with me.

III

LET ME use this notion of *interest* as a hermeneutical ploy and focus then on *Tess-2*. Hardy's fifteen letters, when isolated from the rest of the narrative, offer a kind of sketchy outline of the novel, once, that is, we have read the novel. Let me briefly enumerate the letters and identify their contents:

(1) Tess writes to introduce herself to Mrs. d'Urberville—page 39.
(2) A letter comes from Mrs. d'Urberville to Tess in a "masculine handwriting"—page 39.
(3) Tess writes to her mother a "touching and urgent letter," the contents of which are unspecified—page 161.
(4) Joan Durbeyfield writes to Tess in a "wandering last-century hand," advising her not to tell Clare about her past—page 161.
(5) Tess writes the "succinct narrative" to Clare of her past that he never receives—page 176.
(6) Clare's father writes to Clare to explain the heirloom diamonds for Tess—page 185.

8. See Valentin Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).
9. For more on this, see my sources, Fritz Perls, *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy* (1973; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1981), and Fritz Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Lafayette, Calif.: Real People Press, 1969).

(7) After Clare's departure, Joan Durbeyfield writes to Tess asking for money—page 228.

(8) Tess begins, but does not finish, an "appealing letter" to Clare after Alec d'Urberville reappears—page 265.

(9) Tess writes to Clare, asking him to come home and save her from her "temptation"—page 279.

(10) Tess writes an angry note to Clare, saying, "I will try to forget you"—page 295.

(11) Marian and Izz write to Clare (now returning) at Emminster Vicarage, advising him, "Look to your wife if you do love her. . ."—page 303.

(12) Back in England, Clare writes to Joan Durbeyfield, inquiring about Tess's whereabouts—page 305.

(13) Joan writes back to Clare, saying she is not at liberty to tell him—page 305.

(14) Clare "hunted up" the "appealing letter" that he had received from Tess when he was in Brazil—page 306.

(15) Clare rereads the "poor plain missive also lately come to hand" from Marian and Izz—page 307.

Of these fifteen letters, seven are reported to us by the narrator but are not "reproduced" within the text. Only letters 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15 are displayed, that is to say, made to look like letters, physically differentiated from the rest of the text, and only these eight small segments of the discourse operate as clear formal borrowings from the epistolary mode of presentation, as direct, seemingly unmediated written expressions by fictional characters. Clearly, when we focus on these eight letters apart from the rest of the text, the "sketchy outline" they provide points even less distinctly toward the chronological and thematic movement of the whole text as its "referent." This segregated file of letters represents an inadequate and incomplete summary of the events of the entire novel because the letters provide only suspect or circumstantial evidence in support of the discourse as a whole. Consequently, the reader cannot justifiably *deduce* the novel from the letters because the letters in isolation give merely an abstract, generalized sense of a love gone wrong, an emotional ensemble of regret, guilt, disappointment, fear, frustration, and anger. Rather than working to document the thoughts and voices of characters, to particularize, illustrate, and reify moments in the narrative, Hardy's letters in *Tess*, taken by themselves, or rather placed in isolated, non-interactive (nondialogical, nondialectical) juxtaposition to the rest of the text, speak with a much higher level of generalization than does the storytelling of the narrator.

When we read the whole novel, we are tricked by the assumptions and habits of our grammar and reading experience into believing that the evidence of the letters equates to a coding of the entire story, but our experience when we isolate the letters actually belies that conclusion, and in fact we find that the letters signify a version of the story made abstract by the absence of information. The novel as a whole aims for a unified *impression* (and I use the word carefully in the sense in which it is used in the visual arts) by the exclusion of particulars, an exclusion effected temporally by the brevity of our experience with these letters as we move on to find the explanatory voice of Hardy's narrator, and effected spatially

by the information that the letters do not include because of knowledge shared between the characters involved and because Hardy's narrator has provided it elsewhere. The extracted letters of *Tess-2* do not seem to aim at the wholeness of impression desired by the entire novel. The exclusion has become radically emphasized. They do not tell so much a cut-down, summary version of the novel's narrative, but in outlining a simplified, generalized narrative of their own, self-consciously emphasize their own unique *method* of telling, a method actually *defined* by the exclusion that was working toward the goal of impression in the novel as a whole. They tell a new story.

This certainly seems to call into question our normal reading assumption that letters placed within a text act as concretized narrative. But at the same time, it does not allow for any kind of semantically privileged status for the other element in the dialogic structure of the novel, the narrative voice, which not only is absent from *Tess-2* altogether, but which has played no role in its generation, its fictional "writing." Our attention on *Tess-2* effectively represents a paradigmatic shift of the signification of the text that renders incoherent J. Hillis Miller's God-surrogate author and narrator, and leaves only an indeterminately vague "archeological find," a collection of documents whose organizing principle must necessarily move away from its point of origin and toward its point of reception. With this stressing of the definitive status of the epistolary form, we initiate a retrograde trip through the evolution of *narrator* from *editor* that we find in *Werther*. In this search for the center of organization in Hardy's subtext, we have made a small circle back to its epigraph.

Julia, Shakespeare's fragment collector and organizer from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, plays a vital invocatory role at the beginning of Hardy's novel. Her presence surely carries the emotive impulse that Miller sees in it, and it surely addresses the much broader issue of how and with what spirit the reader might go about making meaning out of the experienced text, but more specifically, Hardy's epigraph suggests the need for a central point of rendezvous for the novel's letters (in short, an editor), a need we can corroborate when we remove *Tess-2* from the text as a whole.

I think here of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which goes about telling its story through the framing device of a packet of letters written by would-be Arctic explorer Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Saville. Mrs. Saville does not appear as a dramatized character in the novel; she is not, in fact, even characterized noticeably by what her brother writes to her, or how he says it (as for example the addressees are characterized so extensively in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*). She is, in short, almost entirely *missing* from the novel by all conventional standards of measure. But at the same time, she implies the novel's most intriguing absence, a silent female system of reference for the entire story, a rigorously understated editorship at the very outer extreme of the novel's structure that receives

and collates all documents within — the novel's most lightly traced trope. In *Frankenstein*, Margaret Saville's suggested absence as both addressee and editor helps to explain the physical fact of the novel, how, that is, these letters came to be collected and published, fulfilling thereby the eighteenth-century epistolary novel's sometime drive for a mock verisimilitude. But more importantly, I think, she quietly announces that the entire novel is a story written *to* a woman, *by* a woman, using a man's voice. Thanks to Margaret Saville, if we ask Linda Flower's question — is this "writer-based" prose?[10] — of *Frankenstein*, the answer can offer significantly more than binary possibilities.

But in any case, I suggest that we can carry over the "presence/absence" of a Mrs. Saville to Hardy's *Tess* as well, with, I think, some very interesting results. The somewhat odd, or uncomfortable, conclusion that all my distinction-making and epigraph-discussing makes possible is that we can imagine the existence of an objective, nonmediating being in, yet *between*, the text and the reader's consciousness, the intermediary reader that I have mentioned before who acts as the unstated Julia of the epigraph, the Margaret Saville of *Tess*. Although not present in the novel's narrative, this tropal figure exists as a vital absence. Just as the letter addresses near the beginning of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* demand that we acknowledge an intermediary presence in that novel, the epigraph to *Tess* invites us to *invent* a similar presence/absence as a fictional audience to the novel's letters.

Hardy's preface to the fifth edition of *Tess* in 1892 has proven to be a well-used occasion for critical commentary on the novel. Although some readers have believed it, others have taken his remark that "a novel is an impression, not an argument" variously as an insincere but highly politic disclaimer, a false distinction, or a deconstructive trigger mechanism. In his 1888 article, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," when Hardy announces his preference for impressionism over photographic realism,[11] he suggests another interpretation that probably has not yet been explored with sufficient care. I pointedly mined my discussion above with the word *impressionistic* as an assertion of the analogy of Hardy's remark to Impressionism as played out in the visual arts. The reader understands the letters within the textual matrix in terms not unlike the time and perspective limited "slice of life" represented by many Impressionist canvases. The letters operate by way of the reader's movement through the text, by the tension between concrete and abstract, assertion and evidence that the interaction of letter and matrix narrative establishes. However, when we isolate the eight displayed letters from the rest of the text, Impressionism begins to evolve toward a kind of Post-Impressionism. The "Impression"

10. Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English*, 41 (September 1979), 19–37.
11. Thomas Hardy, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," *Forum* (New York), March 1888, pp. 57–70. See Kathleen Blake's interesting discussion of problems of perception and knowledge, "Pure Tess: Hardy on Knowing a Woman," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 22.4 (Autumn 1982), 689–705.

of Hardy's preface alters as if by way of Cézanne's stated desire "to make of Impressionism something solid and durable, like the art of the museums."[12] The letters by themselves articulate an emphasis on more rigid, definitive cognitive forms, the artifacts of a fictional "history" as offered by some eighteenth-century epistolary novels. But additionally, the formal units of this collection of excised letters provide meaning that is simplified, even "incorrect" in its depiction because of an incompleteness of the code that would allow the reader the intelligibility of a complete narrative. So, for example, when Tess writes her appeal to Clare (279–80) and says vaguely, "I am so exposed to temptation," we cannot understand the specific nature of that temptation beyond perhaps the rather general inference that the temptation is sexual in nature. We certainly cannot reference Alec, his past relationship with Tess, even the circumstances of her present abandonment.

In Cézanne, the "incorrectness" of spatial/geometric perspective implies an essence in objects more permanent (we can read Platonically, more "real") than the transitory and random representation of the senses. In Hardy, the "incorrectness" of his documents, his fictional letters, implies a reading of them that we do not have access to, an experience of them that like the peace of God in Philippians "passeth all understanding," a reading that collects in a mind that in Hardy is not God's, but also is not ours. It is a reading mind identifiable only by its silence, the heavy suspension of saying that penetrates this file of letters[13] and makes of it a system of signification that posits in its narrative disjunction what Richard Eastman has called an "open parable"[14] of the failure of communication. So when we remove the letters from *Tess* and look at them separately, we have a way of making sense out of Hardy's preface remark — in moving from *Tess-1* to *Tess-2* we notice a transition from an impression to an argument for an understanding of discourse that excludes the reader's consciousness. We have an intermediary reader who not only anticipates our own reading experience, but does so with a silence that is inaccessible to us. As a result, we can only learn about this imagined intermediary reader through its effects, make guesses about her on the basis of the conspicuously quiet hole she leaves in the novel once we have imagined her.

12. For more information, see Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, trans. Sheila A. Ogilvie (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1965), and Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne* (New York: Abrams, 1962), both standard reference works on Cézanne.

13. For a valuable way of approaching silence in fiction, see Bruce Kawin's *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982). Kawin employs a useful kind of reader response methodology to metaphorically discuss the "mind" of the text aware of a silence "outside its expression and central to its being" (p. 229).

14. Richard M. Eastman, "The Open Parable: Demonstration and Definition," *College English*, 22 (Oct. 1960), 15–18. On the subject of Hardy's letters, R. M. Rehder writes: "The difficulty of communication is at the center of his stories and the breakdown of communication frequently leads to tragedy. This is symbolised by the notes and letters that continuously go astray, promoting catastrophe." R. M. Rehder, "Form in Hardy's Novels," in *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*, ed. Lance St. John Butler (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pp. 13–27.

IV

As I hope will be clear, I have been moving in this discussion around the perimeter of Hardy's metaphysics for some time now. Although I do not intend any thorough exposition of his thought, I would like to fill in a few gaps. Heavily influenced by Kantian idealism, and more especially by the romantic Schopenhauerian assumption of the power of the mind to form and shape reality, Hardy filled *Tess* with numerous references to a blind "Will" that informs all being, living and nonliving. Finding much agreeable in what Mary Ann Kelly calls "Schopenhauer's godless and fatalistic philosophy,"[15] Hardy can suggest for Tess at best only a "vague ethical being" as a providential agency directing the relentless determinacy of human affairs, a being which stands for little more than the ultimate expression of the irrational and implacable will to live that pervades all things. Hardy's "unsympathetic First Cause" is either a conscious being "infinitely far off"[16] or an unconscious being without reflexive insight into the damage its emanations of Will produce on this "blighted apple" (25) of a world.

To the extent that the Schopenhauerian scheme is played out in *Tess*, humans are mechanized by their participation in the irrationality of a universal Will, and their consciousness represents mainly a source of pain, an unfortunate blind alley in evolutionary progression. Death is a death of consciousness and the only possible release from the pain inherent in the consciousness of willing; cessation of willing is the only freedom open to humans. Tess's execution disintegrates her partial awareness of her ultimate state; the black flag that flies over Wintoncester is the black flag of a kind of anarchy—the radical disorganization of consciousness that comes with death. Similarly, but on a more fundamental level that engages the structural integrity of the novel itself the way Tess's death engages extrafictional human life, imagining an intermediary reader in *Tess* transfers this evolution away from consciousness into a fictional apparatus. The intermediary reader passively receives the novel's letters and evidences the cessation of Will by way of her silence.

Charlotte Thompson finds evidence of an imaginative "unseen force"[17] in *Tess* that operates through the narrator to transform by the "power of the mind" idea into substance and vice versa. Although she does not say as much, we end her article assuming that her "unseen force" must name the author and that she must grant him the same sort of hegemony that

15. Mary Ann Kelly, "Hardy's Reading in Schopenhauer: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," *Colby Library Quarterly*, 18.3 (Sept. 1982), 183–98—a highly accessible source of information on Schopenhauer's influence on Hardy's world view. I find Kelly's reading of Schopenhauer in *Tess* very convincing.

16. Thomas Hardy, as quoted in William Archer, "Real Conversations. Conversation 1.—Mr. Thomas Hardy," *The Critic*, 38 (April 1901), 316; cited in Kelly.

17. See Charlotte Thompson, "Language and the Shape of Reality in *Tess*," *ELH*, 50.4 (Winter 1983), 729–62.

J. Hillis Miller did in *Distance and Desire*. I incline to believe that Thompson and Miller are after all correct in a specific and interesting way. In Schopenhauer's aesthetics, art has the capacity to effect a temporary suicide, to briefly still desire and suppress Will in its audience. "He who is sunk in this perception," Schopenhauer writes, "is no longer individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; but he is *pure*, will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*."[18] I must switch gender-specific pronouns now because Schopenhauer's portrait of the audience conforms almost precisely to my conception of the intermediary reader. I can accept Miller's and Thompson's notions of the author as "unseen force" only to the extent that I regard the historical author as the source of the trope of the intermediary reader, a trope both representative of the will-less "subject of knowledge," and (if we allow Schopenhauer his aesthetic experience) generative of it.

V

To SOME extent then, to make any sense, or to make anything else for that matter, out of the role of the intermediary reader in *Tess* we must get behind what Foucault terms our "reflexive categories"[19] to remove the "self-evidence" from perhaps our most basic reading assumption, our own centrality in the reading situation, that flattering and naturalized notion of ours which flourishes in the 1980s as our aesthetic continues to adopt criticism as its own. A novel that sometimes seems to carry within itself its own "reader" surely does not need us to fulfill its function, or at least, shall we say less fancifully, *discusses* the issue of the ultimate irrelevancy of humans, to reading, to other frames of reference.

Perhaps our role assumption stems from a semantic confusion. For example, Susan Horton draws a useful line between the *reader* and the *interpreter*. "In fact," she writes, "to the extent that all of us have become efficient interpreters we have ceased to be 'readers' at all, managing to become storage-and-retrieval-system builders even as we scan the text during our first 'reading' of it."[20] For Horton, this remark serves to introduce the temporality of the reading experience and her comments on the work of Stanley Fish; for me, it suggests a distinction that can clarify the role of the intermediary reader in *Tess*. Although Horton goes on to back away from the full force of the remark I cite above by safely and reasonably maintaining that the reader and the interpreter are "after all is said and done" the same person, must this necessarily be so? Or rather, cannot the invitation to delineate between reader and interpreter operate

18. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Bk. III, p. 34, cited in W. T. Jones, *Kant to Wittgenstein and Sartre*, second edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), p. 152.
19. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1976), p. 22.
20. Susan R. Horton, *Interpreting Interpreting* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 24–25.

in *Tess* as a fictional device? Most agreeably so. Once we have acknowledged her, the intermediary reader acts to give a shape to the letters in the novel; the intermediary reader, in fact, can only be understood as coextensive with the letters themselves, as the shape she herself gives them. If we apply to the intermediary reader Horton's notion of the reader with its full force, we have reading as passive collecting, reading as a noncognitive process that in a way we cannot fully grasp does not even necessitate active mental involvement. Geoffrey Hartman's description of reading as "the status of words in the psyche"[21] begins to sound as if it resides at a frightening distance from the rather shopworn "scrutiny of content" that it replaces.

In consequence, we understand the muteness of *Tess*'s intermediary reader as a signal of the absence of consciousness, as a Schopenhauerian cessation of Will that penetrates the novel in a manner that a mediating narrator and an interpreting critic cannot. In short, an existing, but absolutely silent, absent "reader" is perhaps the most effective way of interjecting Hardy's notion of unconscious Will into the structural framework of the novel. Imagining an intermediary reader is perhaps the best way of understanding how an "unseen force" can operate in the novel and be at all analogous to Hardy's (as opposed to necessarily Miller's, Thompson's, Ellis's, or anyone else's) notion of how an "unseen force" actually behaves and is humanly perceived. By following the lead of the novel's epigraph, we can turn *Tess* into something it might not be, an epistolary novel, and watch how it ignores its active author in favor of its distant, unknown listener; we can watch how the novel becomes even truer to the Thomas Hardy we claim.

Early in the novel, Hardy's narrator comments on a conversation between Alec and Tess, "Her strategic silence confirmed his suspicion" (46).[22] Truly, it is a conclusion we might well arrive at about the novel's intermediary reader as well.

But the letters-within-the-novel do not have a single reader: there are different intended readers, who sometimes but not always are the actual readers-in-the-first-instance. The only single reader of the whole lot is not "Margaret Saville" (as Joan Durbeyfield is not the writer of all or even half of the letters) but the reader-of-the-novel. Which ruins his whole

21. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), p. 129.

22. I would like to rewrite that line with the gender-specific pronouns underlined for emphasis—"*her* silence" and "*his* suspicion." Perhaps the final issue in Hardy's extinguishing of consciousness is one of gender. It surfaces for me in positing an intermediary reader that I sense as female. Tess is executed; the intermediary reader is silent and passive. Why must the female consciousness evolve away first? Is this a compliment, or does it conceal a kind of apocalyptic version of the exclusivity of the Kantian male mind? At the very least, the death of female consciousness in *Tess* carries with it the same ambiguity as does Hardy's expression of "pure" womanhood.

argument, even tho he makes a lot of interesting points along the way. Let's start anew with a different point which may be more rewarding: Tess (+ other Hardy novels), w/ its many letters, presuppose attendant to us as readers, all of them, like us, in perfect aware of the full story.