

## The Gesture of Pity in "Jude the Obscure" and "Tender Is the Night"

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I am still reluctant to imagine a world, the rulers of which, will be completely indifferent to law, well-being, profitable labor, industry, credit, etc., and will govern with absolute brutality.

Jacob Burckhardt<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the last chapter of *Jude the Obscure*, as Arabella watches the Remembrance Day games, Vilbert slides his arm about her waist. Although her husband is dead, she feels uneasy. Having slipped out of the room in which Jude's body lies, irked that "he should die just now!" (p. 490),<sup>2</sup> she wonders what will happen if the body is discovered before she returns. In that room Jude has whispered Job's curse on his own life, mingling it antiphonally with the cheers of the Remembrance Day crowd Arabella has joined. At the end of *Tender Is the Night*, as he prepares to return to America, leaving that place that, "in a way, he discovered," Dick Diver makes a parting gesture from the terrace of the hotel: "He raised his right hand and with a papal cross he blessed the beach" (p. 314). When she moves to go to him, Nicole is restrained by her lover and husband-to-be, Tommy Barban. A curse despairingly uttered, a blessing ironically given—both are judgments. In each situation, a deserted man of certain good qualities moves into obscurity, vacating a place once marked in some manner as his—Christminster and Gause's. A new time has come, one with which neither man can contend. Yet the disappearance of each man signifies that something valuable is lost, perhaps irrecoverably.

No critic has to my knowledge linked these two novels. Thirty-six years separate them as do more than three thousand miles of ocean. They lie on either side of the great war. And they show certain strong differences. Hardy describes nearly the full life of a man, Fitzgerald a portion. *Tender Is the Night* avoids the schematic pairings of male and female, the intricate patterns

Hardy uses of matching, parting, and rematching, while *Jude the Obscure* lacks the large cast and complex reflections of theme and character that make of Fitzgerald's novel a kind of prism.

Yet the two works share enough similarities to make a consideration of them worthwhile. Both are novels about growing up, even though Fitzgerald's centers on a later period of Dick Diver's life, giving the past only through occasional references. Both men come from tainted family lines—the Fawleys lacking what Aunt Drusilla calls "sprawl" (p. 14), the Divers having sunk to "tired stock" (p. 203). Both men are drawn to women who suffer from psychoneurotic problems, each man falling in love and devoting to the woman so much of his emotional life that he bankrupts himself of energy. But most important of all, both novels depict change, not just changes in character, in structures social and historical—the changes that might be thought part of the generalized subject matter of any novel—but changes qualitative and metaphysical, changes in the spirit or nature of the time. The two heroes, Jude Fawley and Dick Diver—both decent men—suffer the advent of a new era inimical to the qualities with which each man was born and nurtured. In the life of each is dramatized the waning effectiveness of the altruistic impulse.

In presenting the bleak world Jude lives and dies in, Hardy intensifies features of an earlier Victorian pessimism, pushing them toward an end-of-the-century darkness.<sup>3</sup> How much the near end of the nineteenth century contributed to the sense of ending in *Jude the Obscure* one cannot say. But the intensification of view across the century is apparent—progressing, for example, from the embittered vision so brilliantly embodied in *Vanity Fair* through the sense of melancholy and alienation described by Matthew Arnold to that "coming universal wish not to live" expressed and dramatized in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude's desire to end his life and Little Father Time's success in taking his own punctuate a deepening pessimism that can be traced through Hardy's major novels—from Clym Yeobright's melancholy to "the ache of modernism" felt by Angel Clare to the young Jude's desire not to grow up.<sup>4</sup> Jude's is a world in

which people of an especially compassionate nature are not only vulnerable but threatened. The narrator suggests the danger early in the novel in a description of the young Jude:

... he was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything. He had never brought home a nest of young birds without lying awake in misery half the night after, and often reinstating them and the nest in their original place the next morning. He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been positive grief to him in his infancy. This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. (p. 13)

This last sentence is heavily loaded, the word "weakness" ironic at first glance, given the list of illustrations that precedes it. But the phrase, "as it may be called," blunts the irony in the use of the word and a reader's inclination to think of such sensitivity as commendable. Understanding the nature of the world the boy lives in, the narrator—as it turns out—speaks without mask, denying our first reaction to "weakness," telling us that the world he describes does, indeed, fail to value such feelings of pity as Jude's.

In *Tender Is the Night*, as the severity of the new order increases, Dick Diver's ability seems to wane. The reasons for his decline are difficult to pinpoint as is the nature of the world to which he gives his papal blessing.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, pity appears to be an old-fashioned commodity in this world as well. In his way, Dick Diver is just as much the "tender-hearted fool," to use Arabella's term (p. 74), as Jude is. Possessing a more capable and winning personality than the Wessex stone-cutter, he has stronger influence; more people depend upon him. Though he is more conscious than Jude of his own superiority, and takes pleasure in it, the strength of his compassion—as it shows, for example, in his treatment of the girl at the cemetery—is no less. Fitzgerald does not provide in *Tender Is the Night* the kind of revelatory episode that Hardy does in the scene with the rooks. But his narrator does comment on Dick and his illusions, and Fitzgerald writes elsewhere of the quality he considers supreme in the earlier British writer.

When Dick arrives in Zurich around 1917, the narrator tells us, he managed to get there "on less Achilles' heels than would be required to equip a centipede, but with plenty—the illusions of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people; illusions of a nation, the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely, that there were no wolves outside the cabin door" (p. 117). Though these illusions are not the same kind of "weakness" that the narrator of *Jude the Obscure* points out, the illusions are patently a burden. That they might cause Dick Diver like Jude to ache a good deal, especially as he moves further from the mythical frontier world, appears distinctly possible: alter the frame of reference and the quotation with its description of "illusions" could describe the Wessex stonecutter. Furthermore, some of Fitzgerald's own comments on Hardy point up what Fitzgerald thought one of Hardy's literary virtues, and in noting that virtue, call attention to a quality found not just in Jude and Hardy the writer but also in Dick Diver and Fitzgerald the writer. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, circa March 5, 1922, Fitzgerald says of James Harvey Robinson's *The Mind in the Making*: "I think it's a thoroughly excellent book. It states the entire case for modernity's lingering hope of progress. It is a depressing book, I think, as are Wells' and Shaw's late things, and all those of that brave company who started out in the 90's so full of hope and joy in life and faith in science and reason. Thomas Hardy survives them all."<sup>6</sup> Why Hardy survives, in Fitzgerald's view, might be explained by a statement he makes elsewhere: "the thing that lifts them [Hardy and Conrad and Dreiser] above the 'cerebral' novelists like Wells [is]—the profound gesture of pity."<sup>7</sup>

This is a strong statement,<sup>8</sup> pointing to an important feature shared by the two writers. That quality Fitzgerald finds in Hardy shows itself presumably in the way the writer looks out upon the condition of human kind and in the sympathetic manner in which he responds to his vision artistically—in the gestures embodied in character, plot, setting, theme. It would show itself not only in the sympathy of the author for his characters but also in the sense imparted to the reader of the author's concern for him. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling

clarifies: "... if we attempt to explain the power and charm that the genre of the novel exercised in the nineteenth century, we must take full account of its pedagogic intention and of such love as a reader might feel was being directed towards him in the solicitude of the novel for *his* moral well-being, in its concern for the right course of his development."<sup>9</sup>

Pity in both Hardy and Fitzgerald as presented in these two novels appears to be aroused by the view that a worthy human being fails or is destroyed in an environment of indifference and even hostility. Hardy's definitions of tragedy help to clarify both works. In 1885, he wrote: "a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out." Seven years later, he put it more succinctly: "The best tragedy—highest tragedy in short—is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Fitzgerald writes to his daughter of "the tragic sense of life":

By this I mean the thing that lies behind all great careers, from Shakespeare's to Abraham Lincoln's, and as far back as there are books to read—the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not "happiness and pleasure" but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.<sup>11</sup>

The nature of Hardy's "inevitable" and Fitzgerald's "conditions" is partly defined in a brief conversation Arabella has with Phillotson. Having seen him for the first time after a number of years, she chastizes the man for letting Sue leave him:

"Well, she's got her deserts now."

"Yes," said Phillotson, with biting sadness. "Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would!"

"Well—don't forget to try it next time, old man." (p. 384)

The antecedent for "it" must be "cruelty," a "law pervading all nature and society."

In Jude's world creatures are too readily hurt by cruel deeds. "Pigs must be killed," said Arabella (p.75). The rooks must be frightened from Farmer Troutham's field because of a "flaw in the terrestrial scheme, by which what was good for God's birds was bad for God's gardener" (p. 13). Both animal and birds are weaker than the humans who of necessity act against them. Oppose human beings one with another, not in terms of simple

strength but in terms of all their sensitivities, their passions, their beauties, and the potential vulnerability of any one of them is readily exposed. Jude's perhaps most. And Sue's. Not only is cruelty a part of the law of survival, but the world of the novel also has lust and violence lying near its surface—as is shown in the entrapments and deaths of animals and humans, the preying of one creature upon another—approaching that self-destructive time when “the coming universal wish not to live” will be realized.<sup>12</sup>

In *Tender Is the Night*, a novel covering a later time period, the violence has almost broken through—*almost* because the novel is permeated with the sense of something to come that is still more threatening. The event underlying a considerable portion of the work is World War I, now past, in which, as Dick Diver says, “All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up . . .” (p. 57). That great war had taken “religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. . . . You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember” (p. 57). Though Dick Diver's tone is partly jocular as he speaks to Rosemary, much is serious. By the end of the novel, the sense of loss is real. The new world belongs to the McKiscos, the Tommy Barbans, the Baby Warrens; Abe North is beaten to death in a speakeasy; Mary North attaches herself to Lady Caroline Sibly-Biers. At the end of the novel Dick speaks with Mary:

“You're all so dull,” he said.

“But we're all there is!” cried Mary. “If you don't like nice people, try the ones who aren't nice, and see how you like that! All people want is to have a good time and if you make them unhappy you cut yourself off from nourishment.”

“Have I been nourished?” he asked. (p. 313)

The values that both men adhere to belong to an earlier time. For Sue and Jude the dream is one of a childlike existence, of “infancy and freedom” (p. 165), and of an earlier civilized era, one of “Greek joyousness” (p. 358). Dick Diver's dream is associated also with infancy, but the time in American history to which Fitzgerald turns is a pre-Civil War and genteel world.<sup>13</sup> Dick's dream concerns his father:

In the summer father and son walked downtown together to have their shoes shined—Dick in his starched duck sailor suit, his father always in beautifully cut clerical clothes—and the father was very proud of his handsome little boy. He told Dick all he knew about life, not much but most of it true, simple things, matters of behavior that came within his clergyman's range. "Once in a strange town when I was first ordained, I went into a crowded room and was confused as to who was my hostess. Several people I knew came toward me, but I disregarded them because I had seen a gray-haired woman sitting by a window far across the room. I went over and introduced myself. After that I made many friends in that town."

His father had done that from a good heart—his father had been sure of what he was, with a deep pride of the two proud widows who had raised him to believe that nothing could be superior to "good instincts," honor, courtesy, and courage. (pp. 203-204)

His father is also Dick's link with his genealogical heritage, destroyed when the father dies: "Dick had no more ties here now and did not believe he would come back. . . . These dead, he knew them all, their weather-beaten faces with blue flashing eyes, the spare violent bodies, the souls made of new earth in the forest-heavy darkness of the seventeenth century" (pp. 204-205).

For both men, the awareness of loss intensifies feelings of anxiety and despair. They show most clearly in *Jude the Obscure* but are scarcely less apparent in *Tender Is the Night*. One of the central means used to describe the alien nature of the world each man lives in is the use of bizarre incidents—in the earlier novel incidents that might be considered everyday but are given bizarre qualities through the way they are described, in the later novel incidents that are in themselves irrational, suggestive, and sometimes non-sequitur in effect.

An early example in *Jude the Obscure* is the pig-killing scene, an event that should not be considered uncommon in Wessex. But by humanizing the pig, giving it three distinct responses to its own extinction (a cry of rage, a cry of despair, and a shriek of agony), by characterizing the nature of the event through the eyes of a robin who "peered down at the preparations from the nearest tree, and, not liking the sinister look of the scene, flew away, though hungry," and by allowing the dying animal to rivet "his glazing eyes . . . on Arabella with the eloquently keen reproach of a creature recognizing at last the treachery of those who had seemed his only friends"—by these means Hardy turns

what might be a common event into something bizarre (pp. 73-75). The same is true of the trapped rabbit and the contrast between the animal's "shrill squeak" and the matter-of-fact, sardonically tongue-in-cheek description the narrator gives of the difference between a good and "a 'bad catch' " (pp. 256-57). But most shocking of all and scarcely needing any amplification beyond the description of the deed itself is the murder-suicide of the children—the pathetic note, the mock allusion to Calvary with the three hanging bodies,<sup>14</sup> the extremity of the deed itself. Not an everyday event highlighted to look unnatural, this event correlates with the disintegration of dream, the rupturing of ideals, and it climaxes with its strangeness and horror the failure of the human, the note itself—"Done because we are too menny"—an indicator of pity perverted (p. 405).

*Tender Is the Night* in some ways picks up this extreme and the view of the world it suggests and carries it further. The shooting in the Gare Saint Lazare has scarcely any motivation, a strange flurry of violence about which Dick is kept from acting in a meaningful way. Dick arrives shortly before the shooting, bringing "with him a fine glowing surface on which the three women sprang like monkeys with cries of relief, perching on his shoulders, on the beautiful crown of his hat or the gold head of his cane" (p. 83). Although the description itself is grotesque enough, the shooting as an event suggests more, as do other episodes—the murder of the Negro in the hotel, the beating to death of Abe North in a speakeasy, the violent activities surrounding the first night together of the lovers Nicole and Tommy ("It seems to be two Americans fighting and a lot more cheering them on" [p.296]). The increasing dominance of money (shown through the power of Baby Warren), the strong attraction of a kind of militarism as a way of life (shown through the influence of Tommy Barban), the failure of men who might be considered men of culture (shown through the failures of Dick Diver and Abe North)—these are all reflective of the disintegration of an older security, a life that is lost in the tide of something Hardy calls "modernism." What Fitzgerald writes in *The Crack-Up* is applicable to both Jude and Dick:



This is what I think now: that the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness. I think also that in an adult the desire to be finer in grain than you are, "a constant striving" (as those people say who gain their bread by saying it) only adds to this unhappiness in the end—that end that comes to our youth and hope. . . .<sup>15</sup>

In their presentation of two different worlds, Hardy and Fitzgerald do not simply show that times are changing, that their characters live, in the young John Stuart Mill's words, in "an age of transition"—what, indeed, any age is. Both writers are distinctly aware of past, present, and future. The threat of the future colors the events of the novels, shades them by proximity. The present is too far from the past to be touched by anything but nostalgia and so close to the future that it anticipates.

Although many novels show their central figures shifting into new and different worlds, the alteration frequently derives from a change in the character's ability to perceive—whether he is Donatello or Pip, Frederick Henry or Richard Feverel. Through his own self-education, the hero comes in large part to recognize what he was unable to see before. In *Jude the Obscure* and *Tender Is the Night* both characters do grow: they become more sensitive than they were in the past to the conditions about them and to their own failure to fit. But more unusual is the way the two characters are rejected by those worlds and what the rejection implies. The failures of Jude Fawley and Dick Diver are personal failures. Both men are losers. But a sensitive reader of the two novels is likely to feel that he is himself a loser, worthy of pity, because the worlds of the two men are—in the novels' terms—lost to him. A world unsuitable to Jude Fawley or Dick Diver, he recognizes, is—at best—second best.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Albert Salomon, *The Tyranny of Progress* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Page references within the text are to Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Macmillan, 1963) and to F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night* (1931); rpt. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Curtis Dahl, "The Victorian Wasteland," *College English*, 16 (1955), 341-47; David J. DeLaura, "'The Ache of Modernism' in Hardy's Later Novels," *ELH*, 34 (1967), 380-99; Lawrence J. Starzyk, "The Coming Universal Wish Not to Live in Hardy's 'Modern' Novels," *Nineteenth-*

*Century Fiction*, 26 (1972), 419-35. See also Harold L. Weatherby, "Victorian Wessex," *The Southern Review*, 15 (1979), 300-12, for a sympathetic treatment of the way Hardy tried to cope with "the Victorian mode of compromise." Though it refers to a later period in Hardy's life and concerns Hardy's poetry, Harold Orel's discussion of Hardy's pessimism describes later features of Hardy's thinking. See Chapter 8, "War and *Pax Britannica*" in *The Final Years of Thomas Hardy, 1912-1928* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1976), pp. 121-37.

<sup>4</sup> See Lewis B. Horne, "'The Art of Renunciation' in Hardy's Novels," *Studies in the Novel*, 4 (1972), 556-67, and "Hardy's Little Father Time," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 73 (1974), 213-23.

<sup>5</sup> From the time of the novel's publication, as Matthew J. Bruccoli has indicated, critics have found Dick Diver's decline difficult to account for (*The Composition of "Tender Is the Night"* [Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963], pp. 1-16). Post-1963 responses continue to be troubled.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Turnbull, ed., *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 154

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Robert Sklar, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> For a further discussion of this "profound gesture" in Hardy's novel, see Marion Montgomery, "The Pursuit of the Worthy: Thomas Hardy's Greekness in *Jude the Obscure*," *Denver Quarterly*, 1 (1967), 29-43.

<sup>9</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 176, 251.

<sup>11</sup> Turnbull, *Letters*, p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the passage quoted earlier concerning Jude's "weakness of character" appeared in manuscript to look toward a bleak future also: Jude is described as "the coming sort of man who was born to ache a good deal. . . ." See P. Ingham, "The Evolution of *Jude the Obscure*," *Review of English Studies*, 27 (1976), 167.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the genteel nature of that early world see Sklar, pp. 274 ff.

<sup>14</sup> See Norman Holland, "*Jude the Obscure*: Hardy's Symbolic Indictment of Christianity," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9 (1954), 50-60.

<sup>15</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1956), p. 84.