Tragic Contradiction in Hardy's "The Woodlanders"

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> The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution. In our time, this action is general, and its common name is revolution.[1]

THIS IS A CENTRAL THESIS of Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* — that the tragic is the true mode of presentation of the fundamental twentieth-century experience of the necessity and failure (or partial, temporary failure) of revolution. But where might that leave comedy, and the *complicity* of tragedy and comedy (within ideology, whether revolutionary or not)? Such a complicity could be illustrated so well by Hardy's *The Woodlanders* that the work has often been considered as not a true or real tragedy at all.

But tragedy and comedy may take similar paths to arrive at different ends. The paths are the accidents of coincidence, mistiming, misunderstanding. The ends are normally in the one case death, in the other marriage. Tragedy may be therefore redefined, less as a statement, itself a definition, about Life, gloomy or uplifting, than as the creation of a certain ending and its attendant bitter-sweet feelings. This ending controls of course all that comes before it (even as we read or watch for the first time).

An approach to the idea of tragedy that I would like to put forward here as fruitful, is to consider the tragic form initially as a process of contradictions, which is determined by the grief of loss, and in which each participating contradiction is itself such a process. The author's tragic determination — the contrivance of bringing a protagonist to sorrow and death at or near

the end of the work — is presumably decisive, but is neither wholly personal nor inevitable. Behind and within the author's certain choice lie the power and complexity of ideology, the oppression of social classes, and the natural uncertainty of biological and psychic life. The tragic decision is not only overdetermined, but is itself a contradiction, for the words of death crackle with vitality, and the menace of laughter can never be definitively eliminated. The totalizing ambition of tragedy — the proposed unity of the work and the world, the threatened universal fate of man, whether he be individual or revolutionary — must thus take care to resist the temptation of a generalized solemnity or despair.

Hardy has two protagonists of similar character and situation, who have nevertheless opposing destinies: Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and Giles Winterborne in *The Woodlanders*. Is the fate of Gabriel therefore — in his service and marriage to his mistress, Bathsheba — more just, or is rather the fate of Giles — his dying to save Grace in her marriage to another — more true, or authentic? A vulgar Marxist account (if any such are still on offer) might confidently endorse the fate of Giles as truer: as such a fate might accompany, even if not directly sustain, Hardy's pessimistic critique of rural change, depopulation, and proletarianization. But *Far from the Madding Crowd* remains a remarkably inventive and satisfying novel, responsive, even in its evasions, to harsher realities of nineteenth-century rural change.

Such realities are not decisive or dominant in either the tragic or the comic of Hardy's work. More decisive is the artistic intention, the author's successful participation in a certain form and its history, and such a choice of comic or tragic as ending is not of necessity crudely ideological. The same facts, realities, forces, opinions may help to determine either or both — as they do in the cases of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*. The inevitability of tragedy is not in the totality of the culture, but in the genre within the culture.

It is the tragic intention which controls, articulates, directs the dominant contradiction, without resolving or removing it. The dominant contradiction is made up of losing and having, of

grave and ludicrous, necessary and contingent. The ambiguous, the accidental are finally clarified and justified, in the case of *The Woodlanders*, in Giles's death.

The passing incidents of contradiction in that novel can be conventionally criticized — as more or less moving, realistic or convincing, well plotted, well written — but their tragic status and import is sure: not by the omnipotence of the author, but by the dominance of fictionally realized and mourned death.

In a well-known passage of the General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912, Hardy does indeed acknowledge the legitimacy of comedy:

> Differing natures find their tongue in the presence of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer's instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond. That before a contrasting side of things he remains undemonstrative need not be assumed to mean that he remains unperceiving.[2]

Many critics of *The Woodlanders* have noted its comic elements, Michael Millgate especially.[3] These elements are particularly dramatic, as Hardy appears to employ the confined and isolated space of Little Hintock as a stage. For two substantial sequences in the second half of the novel, the drama is in many respects farcical.

The first sequence (chs. 30-36) begins with Melbury's observation of the secret meeting of Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond, and ends with Fitzpiers's secret, wounded residence in Hintock House. The events of the sequence include Melbury telling Giles that Grace loves him (ch. 31), Melbury's desperate interview with Mrs. Charmond (ch. 32), Mrs. Charmond's confession to Grace (ch. 33), Melbury's second observation of a secret meeting of Fitzpiers and Felice (ch. 34), Fitzpiers's light-headed ramblings to Melbury about his love for Felice, and the agitated arrivals of Suke Damson and Felice Charmond at the Melburys' house (ch. 35). The contrivances of bedroom farce are no doubt appropriate to this episode of a middle-class adultery, but the secluded rural scene gives these intrigues an air more intrusive than diverting.

At the end of chapter 30, the social comedy of Grace's quarrel with her father over the effects of her education, is shadowed by her preceding new vision of Giles's simplicity, and her conclusion, which seems to share something of Hardy's own tragic sense of rejected values, that

> Honesty, goodness, manliness, tenderness, devotion, for her only existed in their purity now in the breasts of unvarnished men; and here was one who had manifested such towards her from his youth up. (p. 238)

Melbury's visit to Mrs. Charmond in chapter 32 to persuade her to break off her intrigue with Fitzpiers has a precedent in an earlier Victorian tragedy, *The Mill on the Floss*, III, 7, when Mrs. Tulliver surreptitiously visits lawyer Waken, in a vain attempt to persuade him to spare her rash and unfortunate husband. George Eliot insists on the ironic comedy of such a scene to a degree that makes Hardy's appear relatively sombre and restrained.

More typically Hardyesque is the tragic-comic device of the mislaid letter in ch. 34, Marty's to Fitzpiers about Mrs. Charmond's false hair, a device which is repeated with greater effect in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Tess's failed confession to Angel, ch. 33).

The comedy of Fitzpiers's accidental disclosures to Melbury in ch. 35 has, on the other hand, a broader, heartier tone, reminiscent perhaps of Fielding:

> "People don't appreciate me here!" the surgeon exclaimed; then, lowering his voice, he added softly and slowly "except one — except one! . . . A passionate soul, as warm as she is clever, as beautiful as she is warm, and as rich as she is beautiful. I say, old fellow, those claws of yours clutch me rather tight — rather like the eagle's, you know, that ate out the liver of Pro — Pre — , the man on Mount Caucasus. . . . People don't appreciate me, I say, except *her*! . . . Ah, God, I am an unlucky man! She would have been mine, she would have taken my name; but unfortunately it cannot be so! I stooped to mate beneath me; and now I rue it."
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> (pp. 269-70: Hardy's dots)

Suke Damson, who figures prominently alongside Mrs. Charmond in the second half of the chapter, is more than an echo of Molly Seagrim.

The second sequence of tragi-comedy (chs. 45-47) is briefer and more melodramatic. It is overshadowed by the preceding death of Giles, and it centres on the setting of the man-trap, symbol, both evident and complex, of conventional cruelty, old and new, which has trapped and broken, in different ways, Grace as well as Giles. Its frightening snap on Grace's dress serves to re-establish her marriage with Fitzpiers.

Scenes in both sequences open and close with dispositions that have something clearly of a dramatic quality, the demonstration or manipulation of spectacle:

> Examine Grace as her father might, she would admit nothing. For the present, therefore, he simply watched. (p. 235)

Melbury sees, and feels, acutely how his daughter is slighted by Fitzpiers. His eventual interventions have a certain wilfulness, but he acquires a dignity beyond the role of the comically obtuse, ambitious parent.

> There was agitation that day in the lives of all whom these matters concerned. (p. 252)

In the following first conversation of Grace with Mrs. Charmond in the wood, she divines that the fine lady is indeed in love with her husband, Fitzpiers. Grace becomes more sympathetic to her when she sees that Mrs. Charmond does not experience these events as a comedy (p. 256).

The second meeting of Grace and Mrs. Charmond in the same chapter, when both are lost in the wood, begins with dramatic uncertainty, the prelude to Mrs. Charmond's confession:

> The cry was immediately returned by the other person; and Grace running at once in the direction whence it came beheld an indistinct figure hastening up to her as rapidly. They were almost in each other's arms before she recognized the outline and white veil of her whom she had parted from hours before — Mrs. Charmond. (p. 257)

The conclusion of chapter 35 which recounts Melbury's comic encounter with the dazed Fitzpiers, when he angrily overhears the surgeon's heartless monologue on his wasted talents, has a laconic menace:

> Had the old man been able to watch Fitzpiers narrowly enough, he would have observed that, on rising and walking into the thicket, he dropped blood as he went; that he had not proceeded fifty yards before he showed signs of being dizzy, and, raising his hands to his head, reeled and fell. (p. 277)

The following chapter opens:

> Grace was not the only one who watched and meditated in Hintock that night. (p. 278)

There is also Mrs. Charmond, soon to be called upon to succour the injured Fitzpiers.

The dramatic quality of the notorious episode of the man-trap in chapter 47 depends considerably on Hardy's careful plotting, and handling of physical space:

> The position of things at that critical juncture was as follows. Two hundred yards to the right of the upper end of Tangs's garden Fitzpiers was still advancing, having now nearly reached the summit of the wood-clothed ridge, the path being the actual one which further on passed between the two young oaks. Thus far it was according to Tim's conjecture. But about two hundred yards to the left, or rather less, was arising a condition which he had not divined, the emergence of Grace as aforesaid from the upper corner of her father's garden with the view of meeting Tim's intended victim. Midway between husband and wife was the diabolical trap, silent, open, ready. (p. 363)

Between chapters 30 and 47, there are an unusually (even for Hardy) high number of explicit references to Shakespeare. These include an interesting comparison of Giles and Horatio:

> Like Hamlet's friend, [Giles had] borne himself throughout his scathing
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> "As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing," investing himself thereby with a real touch of sublimity. (p. 238)

Hardy is, and made himself, very much at home in the Shakespearean tragic world, but there are lines of emphasis which he decisively redraws. Fitzpiers, in his egotism and instability the precipitator of tragedy rather than its victim, plays a tawdry Hamlet, at some distance from Giles's Horatio. The institution of marriage receives a different questioning.

There are also appropriately two quotations from *Othello* (on pages 280 and 303), a tragedy whose plot relies perhaps more heavily than any other of Shakespeare's on the machinations and misunderstandings of comedy. We might see in Giles something of Othello's simplicity and punctilio, but it is rather the unfaithful Fitzpiers who feels, after Giles's death, the pangs of jealousy, until he is at last respectably reassured of Grace's innocence.

Grace and Marty, faithfully tending Giles's grave twice a week with flowers, are compared to "the two mourners in *Cymbeline*" (p. 344).

The tragedy of Giles's death, so pitifully casual and unnecessary to a liberal morality, is in some anticipation of that of *Jude the Obscure*: it is the same "letter" that killeth, it is Hardy's same passionate and continuing indictment of Victorian sexual morality and its failure to value love.

But the last tableau of Grace as chaste nurse ministering to the heroically scrupulous Giles is an appeal to Victorian sentiment that the portrayal of Arabella at the end of *Jude* clearly avoids.

In spite of our general sense of Hardy's indebtedness to the Greeks, his tragedy has a different sort of inevitability from theirs. The tragedy of the Greeks (certainly of Aeschylus) is explicitly religious, and its inevitability lies in the undisputed actions of the gods. In the more secular, individualistic tragedy of Shakespeare and Hardy, the dominant culture of the age is less decisive in determining the fate of their characters. More decisive is the author's successful, particular practice within that culture. There is no certain distinction to be drawn in the work of Shakespeare between the events of tragedy and those of comedy. Both Falstaff and Lear are wandering kings uncrowned; Leontes and Othello are both jealous to madness; Beatrice and Cleopatra both shine in the pertness of repartee and flirtation. The difference is in the presentation, or more precisely, in the ending which colours and controls the presentation. The accidents of meeting and not meeting, of not knowing and misunderstanding, can serve to test the protagonists in their love and bring them by the beneficence of the author to maturity and the marriage bed of comedy, or to bring them by the author's tragic ruthlessness to that other bed which now no longer gapes, in "a fool-born jest," with Fal-

staffian girth, but is attended finally, for us, by an isolated Woodlander, the "straight slim figure" of Marty South.

It is in her rural voice that the concluding words of Hardy's novel are uttered. Up to this point she has had a quietly comic role of a Shakespearean kind: that of the humble, simple character through whom clarification and enlightenment come, more completely to the reader than to the other characters. She now plays at the end the tragic role of the Fool: that of humble faithfulness, illustrating and witnessing to the goodness, purity, and truth of simple life. And like the Fool, whose part has on occasion been doubled with that of Cordelia, Marty fuses the distinction of sex in a religious élan, and symbolizes the totalizing, heterogeneous ambition of tragedy:

> As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible in her, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, she touched sublimity at points, and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism. She stooped down and cleared away the withered flowers that Grace and herself had laid there the previous week, and put her fresh ones in their place.
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> "Now, my own, own love," she whispered, "you are mine, and only mine; for she has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died! But I — whenever I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee again. Whenever I plant the young larches I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I'll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven! . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ee; for you was a good man, and did good things!"
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> (p. 375: Hardy's dots)

This is Giles's valediction, the best sense of his death, the completion of the tragedy. The speech is a contradiction composed of consummation and loss, comic and tragic, dominated by loss. It is the fullness of the contradiction, especially here in its aspect of the personal and the communal, which confirms a major point of Raymond Williams: that tragedy is usually more than the death of the hero, that some religious, social, historical affirmation is commonly a part of the tragic action.[4] The affirma-

tion here is of a way of life which the entire novel, from its title, has been committed to describing.

Marty South's precise and moving formulation casts its shadow backwards over the entire novel, making bitter and sombre the contrivances of farce; and our premonition of it is our superior guide through these transforming woods.

NOTES

[1] *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 83.

[2] *The Woodlanders*, New Wessex Edition, ed. David Lodge (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 396-97. All subsequent references to *The Woodlanders* will be to this edition.

[3] *Thomas Hardy, his Career as a Novelist* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), pp. 257-60.

[4] *Modern Tragedy*, pp. 54-56.