Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

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Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*  

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For most of the twentieth century, critics considered Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) a staple of Victorian realism and distinguished it, as one of the author’s major novels, from the comparatively “defective,” “minor” works of the Wessex sequence. As Peter Widdowson and others have shown, however, the apparent flaws of the lesser-read narratives—the “improbable” use of chance and coincidence, ‘flat’ and ‘stagey’ characterization, melodrama, and an obtrusively over-elaborate style”—appear throughout Hardy’s fiction, and with problematic frequency in *Tess*.¹ Consider, for

¹ Peter Widdowson, “Hardy and Critical Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 75. In his work on the vagaries of Hardy’s reception, Widdowson exposes a conventional distinction—prevailing for most of the twentieth century—between Hardy’s “major” works of “humanist realism” and the “minor” works that (“writing large” the faults of the more favored novels) do not fit the realist mold. Such a view entails, as Widdowson points out, “tacit ‘theoretical’ premises” that tend “to see [Hardy] as really a practitio-ner of humanist realism . . . whose work is marred on occasion by a perverse deviation
instance, the event that initiates the tragic course of the novel: when Tess has to drive to market for her father, who is too drunk to go himself, the family’s only horse is skewered to death by the shaft of the passing mail cart. The disaster is sudden, grotesque, and couched in inflated language: “The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword; and from the wound his life’s blood was spouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss into the road.” The elaborateness of the description seems to travesty the event, calling into question the plausibility and gravity of the situation. The quasi-chivalric rhetoric (of the Prince and the sword) seems to poke fun at the calamity, giving the death of the poor workhorse a kind of courtly significance at odds with the humble nature of the scene. Yet the incident has the gravest consequences for the heroine. Having lost the horse (and, with him, much of her family’s livelihood), Tess has to “claim kin” with a family of d’Urbervilles who have lately moved in nearby, and this expedition exposes her to the villain of the piece. Once again, the situation seems to draw attention to its own preposterousness. Alec d’Urberville is a sort of stage villain possessed of evil intentions, curled mustaches, and a “bold rolling eye” (Tess, p. 53). Yet the consequences, again, are serious: Tess is seduced by her supposed cousin, and her whole catastrophe—her sexual fall, from the characteristic features of such a mode” (“Hardy and Critical Theory,” p. 76). Despite periodic exceptions, this view persisted well into the 1980s and 1990s, when Hardy began to benefit from theoretical approaches (especially materialist, feminist, and poststructuralist) that tend to question their own premises and seek “to subvert the orthodox ‘Hardy’ and to remobilize [what Hardy himself called] the ‘disproportioning’ dimension of his work” (“Hardy and Critical Theory,” p. 80). Appropriately, Widdowson’s own work on Tess emphasizes precisely this aspect of Hardy’s fiction—“its plural discourses and competing styles, its irony, mannerism and self-deconstructing artificiality” (Peter Widdowson, “Moments of Vision’: Postmodernizing Tess of the d’Urbervilles or, Tess of the d’Urbervilles Faithfully Presented by Peter Widdowson,” in his On Thomas Hardy: Late Essays and Earlier [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998], p. 120). Focusing on the self-disrupting aspects of Tess, Widdowson demonstrates that this intensely visual novel persistently draws attention to the inherent limitations of vision, and dramatizes—while claiming to be the portrait of “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented”—the inadequacies of perspective and representation (including its own).

the birth and death of her baby, Angel Clare’s abandonment of her, her murder of Alec, and her execution—follows inevitably from this event.

Recent work has sought to consider Tess as a novel that, in its stylistic unevenness, melodramatic characterization, and improbable plot-development, draws attention to its departure from the tradition of narrative realism to which it ostensibly adheres. As realism has itself come into question as a potentially problematic form—a form pretending to a transparency at odds with its quality as fiction, and inclined to furnish imaginary resolutions for the contradictions inherent in actual social experience—Hardy’s “lapses” have tended to receive more sustained and complex treatment. Penny Boumelha, for example, suggests that Hardy’s novels are radical in their ruptures of formal coherence, their narrative dissonances demonstrating “resistance to reduction to a single and uniform ideological position.”3 Tess, she argues, shows “Hardy’s increasing interrogation of his own modes of narration” (Thomas Hardy and Women, p. 132), as Tess’s treatment within the novel—her objectification by both Alec d’Urberville and Angel Clare—exposes an exploitative gender ideology in which the narrative, both deploring and participating in Tess’s victimization, is itself implicated. John Paul Riquelme, in a similar vein, argues that Hardy’s novel, destabilizing “determinate representations, conventional attitudes, and stable views,” calls its own realism into question in order to interrogate the validity of its tragic plot.4 Pointing to specific aesthetic decisions, such as the act of naming a character “Angel” and fitting him with a harp (“Echoic Language,” p. 508), Riquelme argues that the “antirealistic” aspects of Hardy’s novel cast doubt on the authority of the social and narrative discourses that ultimately condemn Tess to death. And Linda M. Shires argues that the “fractures” of


representation in *Tess* are part of a critically motivated “radical aesthetic,” the apparent defects of plot and character drawing attention to the social injustices responsible for Tess’s fate. In an observation that echoes and completes Riquelme’s take on Angel, Shires points out that Hardy’s stagey villain “is notably self-conscious and even self-mocking”—at one point, Alec actually “pos[es] with a pitch-fork as Satan”—and argues that Hardy “draws on a known stereotype in outrageously obvious ways only to subvert that stereotype’s very obviousness” (“Radical Aesthetic,” pp. 154, 152). In *Tess*, Hardy “challenges the foundations of realist character-drawing” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 156) in order to call attention to the social violation of individual subjectivity. Tess is continually objectified by the men who pursue her, and Hardy’s two-dimensional characterization dramatizes, by reproducing, the violation of which Tess is a victim—the reduction of individual subjects to objects of exploitation. Arguing that there is a kind of social realism at work in Hardy’s warped characterization, Shires suggests that Tess’s fate is intended to liberate her from the social forces that determine her against her will: “Hardy kills Tess in order to free her from constructions put on her by society and by individuals” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 158).

Tess certainly seems to be a sacrificial object—a status underscored, at the end of the novel, by her apprehension on the altar at Stonehenge. Yet it is necessary to question the clemency of an author who kills his heroine, even if he does so in order to expose the brutality of her objectification, or to “free her” from the invidious constructions of society. Shires notes: “as the book proceeds, [Tess] becomes less and less individualized: turned into a ‘figure in the landscape,’ she eventually disappears altogether, marked only as having once existed by the raising of a black flag” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 154). Though logically consistent with her increasing objectification, this disintegration fashions, at best, an equivocal release.

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for Tess, and tends to emphasize the narrative’s complicity in her victimization.

Critics have always been troubled by a contradiction between the relentlessness with which Hardy contrives Tess’s fate and his apparent sympathy for his heroine. Subjected to one disaster after another, Tess is constantly victimized by forces beyond her control, while the narrative continually stresses her blamelessness. In addition to adding the much-disputed subtitle (“A Pure Woman”) to the novel, Hardy steadily revised the work in order to emphasize Tess’s innocence, and though it has been argued that his characters create the conditions of their own downfall—that “it is not true that actions in Hardy are shaped by some iron determinism”—this explanation seems inadequate to account for some of the more outrageous accidents that befall Tess. Though it is possible to argue that Tess’s ruin is self-inflicted—holding herself responsible for the death of the horse, Tess feels compelled to “claim kin” with Alec d’Urberville—she acts out of a sense of responsibility to her family, and suffers as a result of a family lineage that has little to do with individual agency. The pretensions to d’Urberville grandeur are primarily her father’s, just as the initial calamity with the horse results from her father’s incapacity. What is really at stake in Tess’s heritage seems to be the narrative mechanism by which she is introduced to the conditions of her fall.

As Shires argues, there is “no particular [personal] quality . . . that undoes her, unless it is, ironically, her sheer excellence as a human being” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 151). Thus, almost as relentless in exonerating its heroine as it is in victimizing her, the novel does seem to imply the operation of some “iron determinism” in Tess’s case. As the calamities pile on, it is difficult to shake the impression that there are superhuman forces at

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6 See J. T. Laird, *The Shaping of “Tess of the d’Urbervilles”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). In his account of the manuscript and published versions of *Tess*, Laird describes the process of the heroine’s development as one of consistent “refining, ennobling, and idealizing on the part of the author” (*Shaping of “Tess of the d’Urbervilles,”* p. 125), and this view tends to underscore the perversity of a narrative that condemns its own innocent.

work against her—forces capable of compelling the narrative’s destruction of her, even against its own will.

It may be that these forces are in a sense too obvious for contemporary recognition—too long recognized as commonplace menaces in Hardy’s fiction. Hardy, as is well known, was deeply critical of industrial modernity, and *Tess* has long been read as a novel concerned with the havoc wreaked by mechanization upon the landscape and traditional social forms of agrarian Wessex. Shires makes a nod in this direction when she links Tess’s objectification to the “new historical situation which was altering the relations of society” in the nineteenth century, observing that “mechanization, especially, was changing the relationship of the laborer to her work, and was producing an effect of alienation” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 160). Shires does not, however, pursue the connection between Tess’s personal objectification and the burgeoning force of mechanization—perhaps, again, because the connection is too obvious. Numerous critics have aligned Tess’s sexual objectification with her physical exploitation as a farm laborer. Boumelha remarks that Tess, as an agricultural worker, is “at the point of conjuncture of economic and sexual exploitation” (*Thomas Hardy and Women*, p. 39); Elaine Scarry reflects that Tess’s seduction by her employer amounts to “a hazard of the workplace, an industrial accident”; and John Goode, invoking one of the most famous scenes in the novel, notes that “the violation of the threshing machine” that Tess endures at Flintcomb-Ash “is clearly coherent with the occupation of her body.” Indeed, the scene at Flintcomb-Ash aligns the tyranny of Wessex’s new, steam-driven machines with the sexual machinations of Tess’s personal tyrant. Alec, pitchfork in hand, turns up at the same time as the machine, underscoring the identity between his physical exploitation of Tess and the machine’s relentless physical demands.

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8 The very name “Wessex” is, of course, an archaism. Hardy appropriated the name of an ancient Saxon kingdom roughly coextensive with his semifictionalized geography, thereby emphasizing the rural, preindustrial quality of his landscapes and their traditional (unmodernized) way of life.


Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Yet Alec’s priority seems to recede in the presence of the steam thresher. At Flintcomb-Ash the primary threat to Tess is industrial, and Alec’s power is dwarfed in comparison to the inhuman force of the machinery that Tess is compelled to serve. Thus, while Shires and others focus on Tess’s sexual exploitation, passing over the relationship between her personal plight and the “new historical situation” she embodies, I want to argue that the principal culprit is precisely the historical situation. Reversing the prevailing critical priorities, and tracing objectification and the deformations it produces not to individuals but to the historical processes that overwhelm them, I wish to argue that the “defects” of the novel are in a literal sense the work of mechanization. The machine enters Tess of the d’Urbervilles not only as the diabolical agent of modernization but—driving the action of the novel and producing its effects—as the primary determinant of novelistic form.

Machines, always a disruptive and destructive force in rural Wessex, are of obvious importance in Hardy’s novels, and some of the most influential early evaluations of Tess suggest an ameliorative link between the formal “defects” of the novel and the problem of mechanization.11 Arnold Kettle and

11 In Tess the steam thresher appears suddenly, an alien threat in the midst of the preindustrial landscape. In The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) a “new-fashioned” seeding machine materializes in the town square, to the astonishment of the natives (see Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism, ed. Phillip Mallett, 2d ed. [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001], p. 127). And Hardy himself, in his recollections of Dorchester (fictionalized as Casterbridge), recalls the coming of the railroad as a force that, importing popular music from London, “sl[ew] at a stroke” the old country ballads of oral transmission (see Thomas Hardy, The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy, ed. Michael Millgate [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985], p. 25). So disruptive are machines in Hardy’s narratives that Simon Gatrell has argued that the railway is not only “an instrument of the destruction of Old Wessex” (see Gatrell, “Wessex,” in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy, p. 28), but in fact the destroyer of the narrative impulse itself. The gradual incursion of machines in The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess is completed, Gatrell argues, in Hardy’s last novel, Jude the Obscure (1895), where an industrialized New Wessex replaces the preindustrial world that Tess inhabits: “Hardy lost much when he achieved what [has been] called New Wessex. His losses included the desire to write more novels” (“Wessex,” p. 32). In
Irving Howe, among the first important “materialist” critics of *Tess*, praise it as a work of industrial realism, and though both repeat the typical objections to Hardy’s technique—lamenting his unconvincing characterization and his tendency to “[flout] normal probability” (Kettle, “Thomas Hardy,” p. 53)—both exonerate him on the score of industrial themes. For Kettle, *Tess* is essentially an allegory for the fate of agrarian England, and the novel’s “faultiness” subsides when it is read as a tragedy of industrialization. In his view, Tess Durbeyfield stands for an ancient, preindustrial order destroyed by the machine, and her tragedy—however unconvincing or overdrawn as a story of personal experience—gains significance and plausibility through the force of its symbolic implications. Howe is harder to please, disputing the position that Tess is merely “the agricultural predicament in metaphor”; yet he too emphasizes the heroine’s relationship to “the shock of the new farm machines” in rural Wessex (Howe, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 124). Moreover, though he complains that the novel’s “piling on of woes . . . must strain the resources of ordinary credence” (*Thomas Hardy*, p. 112), the plausibility problem disappears for Howe at Flintcomb-Ash. Here the machine—the steam thresher—nearly destroys Tess, as it will inevitably destroy the way of life she stands for: “Tess as a woman, Tess as a distinctive person hardly exists [on the machine]; she has become a factor in the process of production” (*Thomas Hardy*, p. 125). For Howe, as for Kettle, this violation of Tess is only too probable. At Flintcomb-Ash, she embodies the industrial fate of an agrarian people, confronting what Kettle identifies as “real problems of quite overwhelming difficulty” ("Thomas Hardy," p. 58).

According to Howe, “Even those critics and readers who question Hardy’s place as a novelist are likely to acknowledge...

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Gatrell’s view, the outcry over *Jude the Obscure*’s ostensible indecency merely “made the decision [to stop writing novels] easier” (“Wessex,” p. 32). Preindustrial Wessex had finally succumbed to the inevitable pressure of industrialization, and Hardy’s subject—the old world of agrarian England—had succumbed with it.


the disciplined power of this section” (Thomas Hardy, p. 124); indeed, critics widely admire the scene at Flintcomb-Ash for its symbolic force. Yet Tess is not perfectly regular in its rendering of the industrial situation. However realistic the scene is in effect—however convincing its “piling on of woes,” and aesthetically controlled its execution—the novel undergoes a subtle deformation in its representation of the machine. Through a deft distortion of the “real,” Hardy turns Flintcomb-Ash into a living hell, and he turns the machine—through a strangely logical mutation of documentary language—into a monster:

Close under the eaves of the stack, and as yet barely visible was the red tyrant that the women had come to serve—a timber-framed construction, with straps and wheels appertaining—the threshing-machine, which, whilst it was going, kept up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves.

A little way off there was another indistinct figure; this one black, with a sustained hiss that spoke of strength very much in reserve. The long chimney running up beside an ash-tree, and the warmth which radiated from the spot, explained . . . that here was the engine which was to act as the primum mobile of this little world. (Tess, pp. 444–45)

Here the simple “timber-framed construction” of the thresher acquires human characteristics (it is experienced as a “tyrant” or “despot” by the people who tend it) and gradually develops—through a logical extension of this anthropomorphism—the dimensions of a demon and a god. Its engine is “the primum mobile,” or “prime mover,” of the “little world” of the farm; its colors (red and black), like its serpent’s hiss, are diabolical; and it changes Wessex into an underworld, a place of “ash-tree[s]” and smoke. Ash trees are of course real trees, yet here they acquire a symbolic value attuned to the mythic machine, and that transformation (from the “real” to the symbolic or mythic) marks a formal shift away from the more strictly documentary language of “straps and wheels appertaining.” The satanic rendering of the machine is still realistic—consistent with the industrial menace of the scene and the tortures to which Tess is about to be exposed. Yet, in order to convey the extremity of
her circumstances, the realist novel undergoes a mythic deformation, literally creating a monster in the machine.

The steam thresher is a monster of diabolical proportions, a “red tyrant” endowed with a power superior to its human creators. Keeping up “a despotic demand upon the endurance of [the laborers’] muscles and nerves,” the machine created to serve the human community—to ease the labor of the harvest—actually enslaves it, and the rural people regret the passing of the old days “when everything, even to the winnowing, was effected by hand-labour” (Tess, p. 446). Paradoxically, the machine is most realistic in this very monstrosity; it exposes, in its superhuman power, the terrible irony of the industrial conditions it creates. Far more brutal and exhausting than the laborious methods it was built to replace, the machine is inhuman in its strength and dehumanizing to those who tend it. Thus, the engine-man is a kind of demon, like his machine: “his thoughts [are] turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron charge; . . . as if some ancient doom compelled him to wander here against his will in the service of his Plutonic master” (p. 445). God-like, the machine makes its servants over in its own image, and the process of conversion is brutally dramatized in its treatment of Tess: given the worst job at Flintcomb-Ash, Tess has to stand atop the machine and pass sheaves to the engine-man. Though the other workers can pause to refresh themselves, “for Tess there was no respite; for, as the drum [of the thresher] never stopped, the man who fed it could not stop, and she, who had to supply

14 The engine-man, sharing the diabolical properties of the machine, is another monster—“a dark motionless being, a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness, in a sort of trance” (Tess, p. 445). Hardy in fact revised this passage to de-emphasize the human quality of the engine-man. Changing “man” to “being” and replacing “figure” with “embodiment of tallness,” he suppressed the human in the engine-man and stressed the demonic. For a transcription of this portion of the manuscript, see Laird, *Shaping of “Tess of the d’Urbervilles,”* p. 81; and Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Facsimile of the Manuscript, with Related Materials,* ed. Simon Gatrell, vol. 2 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), pp. 78–79. In this description, of course, the engine-man resembles all alienated labor, his dehumanization itself the sign of that alienation: individuals, forced to sell their labor, enter the economy as commodities—as things, not people—and are reduced to mere interchangeable parts in a system of production. Hired to tend the machine, the engine-man’s subjectivity is reduced to a functional level, and he himself becomes like, and subservient to, the machine he is deployed to control.
the man with untied sheaves, could not stop either” (Tess, pp. 446–47). Enslaved to the machine, whose hum “increased to a raving whenever the supply of corn fell short of the regular quantity” (p. 447), Tess loses all individual volition, her body conforming to its demands—even after it is turned off. When the “whirling” of the thresher finally ceases, Tess’s “knees tremble so wretchedly with the shaking of the machine that she [can] scarcely walk” away from it (p. 448).

In comparison to the stagey villain and the more grotesque calamities that befall Tess in the novel, the mechanical monster at Flintcomb-Ash seems hardly unrealistic. Indeed, the mythic representation of the machine captures, with unique power and figurative authenticity, the ironic horror of mechanization—the recognition that humanity, seeking liberation in labor-saving devices, becomes enslaved to its own machines. Yet the most deplored of the novel’s supposed formal defects—its implausible plotting and inflexible villain—appear to result, like the monster, from a connection to the machine. Though Tess’s experience at the “starve-acre farm” (Tess, p. 413) is in a sense the most plausible development in her decline (since she is driven by circumstances to take whatever work is offered), the scene establishes a relationship between hardship and mechanization—and, in the demonic machine, between realism and the deformation of realism—that suggests a literal dimension in the “plot devices” working against her. Hardy’s plotting is often described as “mechanical,” and readers frequently complain that Tess’s fate seems “engineered.” I would suggest

15 In an essay called “The Dorsetshire Labourer” (1883), which has long been recognized as a source for Tess, Hardy emphasizes the degree to which the machine appropriates the worker’s body to its own relentless operations: “I am not sure whether, at the present time, women are employed to feed the machine, but some years ago a woman had frequently to stand just above the whizzing wire drum, and feed from morning to night. . . . [One woman], who had been feeding the machine all day, declared on one occasion that in crossing a field on her way home in the fog after dusk, she was so dizzy from the work as to be unable to find the opposite gate, and there she walked round and round the field, bewildered and terrified, till three o’clock in the morning, before she could get out. The farmer said that the ale had got into her head, but she maintained that it was the spinning of the machine” (Thomas Hardy, “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” in Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose, ed. Michael Millgate [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001], p. 55).
that these metaphors are in a sense intuitions of a literal fact. If Hardy insists upon a fate Tess does not deserve, and deploys forces against her that seem contrived and mechanical, then this is literally the case: the novel’s plot is mechanical, and even draws attention to its contrivances, because Tess is pursued by the machine.  

At Flintcomb-Ash, Tess—a dairymaid and fieldworker—personifies a traditional, agrarian way of life essentially antecedent to the machine, and her exposure to the demonic thresher aligns her destiny with that of rural Wessex, which will inevitably succumb to mechanization. Although the nominal villain, here and elsewhere, is Alec d’Urberville, his tyranny is closely aligned with the machine’s. Like Alec, the threshing machine is new to rural Wessex, and comes originally from the industrial North (the engine-man speaks “in a strange northern accent” [Tess, p. 445]); like Alec, the thresher is “in the agricultural world, but not of it” (p. 445); and the mythic representation of the tyrannical machine—its diabolical appearance and its serpent’s hiss—matches the satanic posture of Tess’s pitchfork-wielding personal tyrant. Indeed, as John Goode and others have noted, the threshing machine’s objectification of Tess bears a family resemblance to Alec’s behavior. Just as Alec treats Tess as an object—a physical thing to be used as he wishes—the machine reduces her to a functional nonentity (she becomes, as Howe puts it, a mere “factor in the process of production”). More perfectly indifferent to the suffering it imposes, the machine may even out-villain Alec in this respect. Yet the resemblance between them is reinforced by the “kinship” plot that exposes

16 The care with which Hardy planned the novel is obvious from the force with which he realizes Tess’s tragedy; yet the disasters that befall Tess seem unrealistic—unlikely and unprovoked. Indeed, as Penny Boumelha has pointed out, Tess is actually unconscious at critical moments. She is asleep at the reins when the mail cart kills her horse, asleep in the Chase when Alec seduces her, and asleep on an altar when the police close in on her at Stonehenge. Yet, as the fanatical stile-painter writes on a country fence—in the harsh red pigment associated elsewhere with machinery—her “DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT” (Tess, p. 113). She is driven involuntarily, even unconsciously, to her destiny, while circumstances work emphatically against her, and her single attempt to liberate herself (when she murders Alec) only ensures her execution. Hardy gives her no way out, sacrificing her to forces beyond her comprehension or control.
Tess to Alec’s perpetual machinations: Alec d’Urberville, originally a “Stoke” from northern England, turns out to be sham gentry; his d’Urberville lineage (his father’s cover for new wealth) is made up. Thus, when he meets Tess (an authentic d’Urberville, though of decayed family), the tyranny to which he subjects her takes on the valences of the new—and artificial—destroying the old. Just as Tess bears a symbolic relationship to old Wessex, embodying a traditional way of life threatened by the machine, Alec comes to personify the new, mechanical forces that threaten to destroy her.17

Alec’s appearance at Flintcomb-Ash underscores his relationship to the machine, and though Tess chooses the machine over Alec—she stays atop the thresher in order to avoid him—this is really a non-choice, and a mere delay of the inevitable. Reprieves are only apparent; the machinery of Tess’s fate is, everywhere, inexorably in motion. Even at Talbothays dairy—a sort of preindustrial Eden to which Tess, escaping Alec’s influence, goes after the death of her illegitimate child—the fatal progress of her destiny is only seemingly suspended. As Irving Howe remarks, “there can be no doubt that in coming to Talbothays Tess has taken another step in her social descent: she is a hired hand and the work itself is seasonal” (Thomas Hardy, p. 122). The idyllic life at the dairy is only temporary, and the lyrical passages in which it is described—the gorgeous sequences in which Tess’s work appears to proceed in harmony with the natural world, and her sexual subjection promises to be ameliorated in the burgeoning affections of Angel Clare—represent a condition that cannot be sustained. Talbothays appears to restore Tess to a prelapsarian state—a pre-industrial, unalienated condition where neither labor nor love

17 This symbolic relationship—the new d’Urberville tyrannizing over the old one—is not accidental. Hardy’s original surname for Alec was “Hawnferne” (a name that severs the possibilities of the “kinship” plot), and the gradual adjustment of the naming principle, by which Tess and Alec were brought into ostensibly lineal correspondence, increased Alec’s symbolic function. As Laird puts it, “Alec represents the forces of moneyed wealth and industrial progress which threaten the traditional agricultural way of life still being pursued—however precariously—by Tess and her parents” (Shaping of “Tess of the d’Urbervilles,” p. 138). Indeed, one of Hardy’s last revisions to Alec’s surname—“Smith” to “Stoke”—suggests, through the industrial associations of the word “stoke” (engines, furnaces, and boilers), the manufacturing source of the nouveau-d’Urberville money.
entails physical subjection: resting her head against a cow, Tess works in physical accord with the animal, her hands moving “gently . . ., like a beating heart,” and Angel is drawn to her by a similar impulse, moved to embrace her by an “influence . . . like an excitation from the sky” (Tess, pp. 212, 213). Yet even here, Tess responds to Angel with an “unreflecting inevitableness” (p. 213) that recalls the circumstances of her earlier seduction, and Angel, apologizing for his advances, hopes that he has not (as Alec has before him) “presumed upon [her] defencelessness” (p. 215). The lyrical beauty of the Talbothays passages, literalized in the figure of Angel at his harp, seems to promise a reprieve for Tess that is at best fleeting, at worst illusory. Indeed, Angel plays the harp with “no great skill” (p. 176), and his lyricism seems intended to draw attention to the fundamental inadequacy of the Talbothays idyll: neither the dairy nor Angel can ultimately restore Tess to a prelapsarian condition; neither can permanently impede the machinery of her fate.

It is significant that when Angel attracts Tess with his harp-playing in the rough gardens of Dairyman Crick, it is already a post-lapsarian landscape she walks through, “gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails . . . underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the appletree-trunks, made madder stains on her skin” (Tess, p. 175). Here Tess’s stained skirts, hands, and naked arms recall, like the apple blight, the fruit that she has already tasted with Alec, and her doom—inscribed in the “madder stains”—bears down upon her even as she appears to be released from it. As she drives the milk to the station with Angel, the scenes of her new love recall her old seduction. Angel is not the anti-Alec but in fact a new version of him (as Boumelha has pointed out, driving Tess in a carriage and feeding her with fruit, Angel repeats elements of Alec’s seduction), and the journey to the station

18 Boumelha argues: “[Alec and Angel] are not the opposites that they might at first appear; they are precisely complementary, as is emphasised, not only by Alec’s temporary conversion to evangelicism and Angel’s momentary transformation into a rake with Izz [when he invites her, on the spur of the moment, to elope with him to Brazil], but also by the similarities between their ways of gaining Tess’s acquiescence. It is not only Alec who is associated with the gigs and traps that, on occasion, literally run
brings Tess face-to-face with the force that will demolish her way of life: “Modern life stretched out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touched the native existences, and quickly withdrew its feeler again” (Tess, p. 268). Though still a tentative incursion, the railway represents the machinery that will inevitably overwhelm Tess and all of old Wessex. Indeed, the “hissing of [the] train” (p. 268) emphasizes a sense of inevitable fatality: the mechanical snake in the garden, the locomotive’s hiss both recalls the origin of Tess’s calamity—the sound of Prince’s blood falling “with a hiss into the road”—and anticipates the “sustained hiss” of the monster thresher at Flintcomb-Ash. At the depot, Tess meditates on the alienation inherent in agricultural production—the fact that the milk that she and Angel deliver will be drunk in London by people “who have never seen a cow” (p. 269). The dairy is not a reprieve from but an inevitable phase in her decline; the machinery of her fate, reaching out a “steam feeler” at Talbothays, propels her toward the hissing engines of Flintcomb-Ash and the embrace of her former seducer.

Flintcomb-Ash represents the nadir of Tess’s misfortunes. The narrative underscores her devastation as she is abandoned by Angel, subjected to the tyrannical machine, and beleaguered by a villain that she had seemed, at Talbothays, to have escaped. Her Angel flown to Brazil, Tess is caught between Alec and the demonic machine, doomed to succumb to the inexorable, overwhelming force that they both represent. Though Alec does not prevail at the starve-acre farm, Tess’s only alternative is to stay with the machine—just as release from the machine precipitates her, again, toward Alec. Eluded at Flintcomb-Ash, Alec gets Tess back when her family is turned out of their cottage at the expiration of her father’s life-hold. Like the steam thresher, the end of the life-hold is a symptom of modernization in Wessex—a stage in the gradual detachment of rural
nineteenth-century literature

laborers from the land they farm. Further, it is explicitly associ-
ated with the force of *machinery*. According to the narrator, as
life-holds fell in, rural families “had to seek refuge in the large
centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as
‘the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns,’
being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced
by machinery” (Tess, p. 478). Particularly telling here is the as-
sociation of social change with the causal force of “machinery.”
This image of compulsion indicates the quality of that compul-
sion: modernized, unfeeling, *mechanical*. Thus, when Tess goes
back to Alec under these circumstances, the resort aligns him,
once again, with the overwhelming force of the machine.19

In Tess, then, the villain—whether the diabolical thresher
or the satanic squire—either is or is identified with the machine,
and the novel’s major “defects” result from that machinery. Tess
is doomed because the agricultural order that she personifies is
doomed, and Alec’s diabolical tyranny—his incessant objectifi-
cation of Tess—is enforced by the fatal plot of industrialization.
The very improbabilities of Tess’s experience dramatize, in
their inexorable operation, the consequences of the *mechanical*
forces at work against her, and Alec’s villainy derives, in its very
overdetermination, from his identification with those forces. As
the narrator puts it, Tess’s destiny shows the improbable “ten-
dency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery,” and
the process to which it exposes her induces not only distortions
of plot and character but also strange warps of tone and style.
Since the narrative has to *impose* the mechanical conditions
it decries, it tends to obtrude its distortions. Thus, overdeter-
mined in his ethereal inadequacy, Angel plays his second-hand
harp with “no great skill,” and Alec appears to send up his own
villainy, mocking, in the flourishes of his pitchfork, the fiendish
malformation of his character. Though Tess’s fate is brutally

19 There is some evidence that Hardy’s use of this word—“machinery”—is uniquely
determined at this point in the novel: in Hardy’s 1883 essay “The Dorsetshire La-
bourer,” the passage under discussion here appears almost verbatim. For the novel,
however, Hardy added the words “by machinery.” Compare the passage from Tess
above with the original version: “This process, which is designated by statisticians as
‘the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns,’ is really the tendency of
water to flow uphill when forced” (Hardy, “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” p. 56).
serious, the narrative often seems to satirize the machinations that it deploys against her, emphasizing the deficiencies of her potential savior and the overdetermined devilry of its villain.

This self-satirizing tendency is distinguishable in the earliest catastrophes of the novel, and it appears, in the narrative of Tess’s misfortunes, earlier than either Angel or Alec. Already in the incident that sets the machinery of Tess’s fate in motion—the collision with the mail cart—the narrative seems to poke fun at the calamities it arranges, making light of its own malevolence. Suggesting a chivalric joust between Tess’s horse and the mail cart, it first mocks Tess’s poor “Prince” and then dwells, with grotesque determination, upon the spectacle of the disaster: “The huge pool of blood in front of [Tess] was already assuming the iridescence of coagulation; and when the sun rose a hundred prismatic hues were reflected from it” (Tess, p. 44).

In the rainbow tints of Prince’s blood, the narrative seems to reflect upon the appalling beauty of its own plot devices, perhaps admiring the sheer overdetermination of the calamity and the spectrum of devastation to be coaxed from this single disaster. Indeed, in retrospect, the scene tends to emphasize the predetermination of Tess’s fate. Parodying Prince’s faintly preposterous name, the narrative of his death (the chivalric discourse of the “Prince” and the “sword”) satirizes the Durbeyfields’ fatal pretensions to grandeur. Further, the phallic and mechanical circumstances of that death (death-by-shaft and death-by-machine) foreshadow, with rather revolting accuracy, the series of disasters about to befall the heroine.20 Tess tries, of course, to

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20 Appropriately, the accident with the mail cart marks Tess’s first encounter with a modern machine. The mail cart is a wonder of nineteenth-century technology: “with its two noiseless wheels, speeding along [the] lanes like an arrow,” it easily demolishes the “slow and unlighted equipage” (Tess, p. 44) belonging to the Durbeyfields. (I am indebted to Jonathan H. Grossman, who commented on an earlier version of this essay, for the observation that the carriage is—though not steam-driven—a machine.) Indeed, though Tess’s cart is a fairly primitive contraption, even the most diabolical of Tess’s machines—the threshing machine at Flintcomb-Ash—bears, with its “straps and wheels appertaining,” a family resemblance to the cart. Thus, the disaster with the mail cart not only sets Tess on her tragic path, but also suggests an evolutionary link between the ancient contrivances of Wessex and those of the modern (steel- and steam-driven) world that will inevitably demolish it. Moreover, the connection between these simple machines and the oncoming tragedy of mechanization sheds light on the famous legend of the d’Urberville coach (which is said to be audible, in its passing, only to “one
resist her fate: “put[ting] her hand upon the hole” in Prince’s breast, she tries desperately to staunch the bleeding—but “with the only result that she became splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops” (Tess, p. 44). Here, as everywhere else in the novel, the “only result” of her resistance is compounded misery. Her efforts are futile, merely staining (in graphic adumbration of her deflowering and murder of Alec) her skirt, hands, and face with blood.

In Tess of the d’Urbervilles, the heroine is doomed from the start. It seems that Tess does nothing to deserve her fate, and this is precisely the case. Any attempt to save herself is undone, like her attempt to save Prince, by the historical and narrative circumstances that control her. In the opening scenes of the book, Tess is already the victim of a system in which the narrative, if it is to succeed in its critique of mechanization, must participate; though a long way from Flintcomb-Ash, the machinery of her destiny is already in operation as she drives Prince to Casterbridge market before dawn. Thus, the “hiss” of the satanic machine is sounded as Prince’s blood falls into the road, and even the most lyrical passages of the novel anticipate a terminal calamity. The notes of Angel’s lyre, sounded at Talbothays, not only denote a false reprieve but also anticipate the scene at Stonehenge, which sings like “some gigantic one-stringed harp” at the site of Tess’s apprehension (Tess, p. 534). Everywhere, the machinery of the heroine’s fate is in motion. Yet this mechanical dimension of the novel—the very dimension that helps explain the narrative’s apparent defects of character, plotting, and tonal consistency—also produces its defects. To expose the overwhelming problem of mechanization, Tess must succumb to the machine. Yet for Tess to succumb to the machine, the narrative has to act like a machine. It has to propel her toward her death, participating in the destruction of its own heroine. To indict the mechanical order, the novel has to become complicit in the very process it seeks to expose.

of d’Urberville blood,” and is “of ill-omen to the one who hears it” [p. 480]. Through the coach, the legend reconnects Tess’s fate (she is doomed, according to the legend, to suffer the transgressions of her ancestors) to the operation of machinery.
Reading *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as a self-implicating industrial novel sheds light on its formal peculiarities and helps explain its equivocal place in the tradition of literary realism. On the one hand, *Tess* is a realistic work, reflecting, as Kettle notes, “real problems of quite overwhelming difficulty”; on the other hand, because the success of its anti-industrial critique depends upon its participation in the very system it deplores, it is a problematic work, and draws attention to itself as such. Only recently have critics begun to recognize that its lapses are significant—that its deformed characterization implicates deforming processes; that its improbable plotting is enforced by inevitable historical changes; that its stylistic and tonal inconsistencies draw attention to the grotesquerie of a work that has to collude with the machine in order to fight it. *Tess* is, quite literally, a provoking work—one that attracts criticism in the interest of making its point. But once we recognize that this is the case—once we distinguish the relationship between *Tess*’s deformities and its self-implicating critique of mechanization—then the very litany of its faults becomes a resource. Its most vexing defects expose a series of formal choices determined by the machine.

To return, then, to the critical appraisal, it is worth considering the persistent focus on defective characterization—especially Alec d’Urberville’s—in light of what we might call Hardy’s narrative “mechanics.” The characterization of Alec is, and always has been, one of the most deplored elements of the book; yet recent criticism has begun to explore the possibility of a determined relationship between the “flawed” representation of Hardy’s stagey villain and the flawed social realities he represents. As we have seen, Linda Shires connects Alec’s

21 In a sense this is an old observation, as both Kettle and Howe suggest a relationship between Hardy’s “florid, moustache-twirling bounder” (Kettle, “Thomas Hardy,” p. 55) and a kind of anti-mimetic realism. Howe justifies Alec’s “stag[iness]” as “a fusion of theater and truth” (*Thomas Hardy*, p. 115), and Kettle remarks that “the whole point about D’Urberville is that he is indeed the archetypal Victorian villain”—a figure to be “enthusiastically hissed by [an] audience” (“Thomas Hardy,” p. 55) that recognizes him not as a person but a symbolical “type.” Satisfied with the symbolic remedy,
stereotyped villainy to the stereotyping process itself, arguing that his “flatness” dramatizes the evils of objectification. In light of the mechanical deformation of *Tess*, however, I would push the point a step further, linking Alec’s warped characterization to the force of mechanization with which he is aligned in the novel. Though Alec objectifies Tess, it is, after all, *Alec himself* who is most thoroughly stereotyped, reduced to a two-dimensional villainy that seems both to enact and to embody the ravages of the machine. Formally, no other character is as “flat.” Even Angel seems more rounded, his rigidity apparently a function of his evangelism and conventional attitudes, his inadequacy a seemingly natural outgrowth of his personal limitations. Moreover, Angel shows some capacity for personal growth, returning (albeit too late) to Tess, while Alec perseveres in his villainy, his destructive tenacity matched only by the machine he represents. Thus, although Alec’s identification with the machine enhances, arguably, his significance in the narrative (it gives a sort of symbolic substance to his conventional villainy), I would venture that it is also responsible for the implacable “flatness” of his character.

Alec is little more than a stage villain or a plot device deployed to ruin the heroine, and there is certainly something overly simplified—and persistently simplified—about him. Though Shires argues that “some readers resist a three-dimensional Alec” (“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 152), this seems to be an irresistible consequence of his characterization itself. The explanation of his flatness does not actually impart a third dimension to him; rather, it explains the lack of such a dimension. Though it is arguable that Alec has, somewhere, a rounded subjectivity (as Shires points out, even he, “the character presented most stereotypically, . . . assumes new identities as the book proceeds” [“Radical Aesthetic,” p. 154]), the novel seems to foreclose upon Alec’s burgeoning complexity in the very act of suggesting it. For instance, some kind of soul-searching must compel Alec to denounce his sinfulness and become an itinerant preacher about two-thirds of the way through the book. Yet however, neither critic develops the formal implications of the symbolic connection between the villain’s unrealistic characterization and the social realism of his “type.”
that very itinerancy propels him into Tess’s vicinity again, where his accidental meeting with her pushes him back into his accustomed role: “I could not resist you as soon as I met you again!” he says (Tess, p. 442). This is not Tess’s fault, but neither—so Alec claims—is it his. He is rather compelled to act as he does, as though his individual relation to Tess were as inevitable as the demolition of the old world that he symbolizes.\(^{22}\)

I would suggest that it is precisely Alec’s identification with the machine that produces these apparently mechanical compulsions, limiting his subjectivity in the very moment of its potential expansion. Alec has, by dint of his relationship to the machine, a *functional* role to play in the novel, and that functional position limits and distorts what is (presumably) an irreducible subjectivity. As Alex Woloch has demonstrated, the more functional the position a character occupies within narrative structure, the more “flat” the character becomes, the very flatness expressing the “reduction and dislocation” of a potentially whole subjectivity.\(^{23}\) Alec, in his encounters with Tess, functions—like the machines he symbolizes—in one particular, repetitive way, and the consequence of that functionality is always the destruction of his individual integrity. Alec, in short, is a victim of what Woloch calls “specialization and its discontents” (*The One vs. the Many*, p. 174): Alec’s two-dimensionality is the price that his subjectivity is constantly paying for his identification with the machine. Character in *Tess*, then, is not only symbolically related to the demolition of the old world by the new, but in fact dramatizes, in its very deformations, the destructive

\(^{22}\) Narrative foreclosure on Alec’s subjectivity is evident elsewhere, and seems programmatic in *Tess*. For instance, one of the most critical moments in the novel—the seduction or rape of Tess in the Chase—is not narrated, and intentionally occludes Alec’s motives. It is unclear whether Alec is actually lost in the Chase (whether he meant to seduce/violate Tess all along, or whether he merely blundered into the opportunity). Moreover, Tess’s own level of resistance remains uncertain, and though the ambiguity of the encounter raises the possibility of complex motives and desires on both sides, the narrative refuses to satisfy us on this point. The seduction/rape is omitted altogether, and the story skips forward to the consequences of the incident. Any equivocations on Alec’s part are left out, as they are in the narration of subsequent encounters.

consequences of that process. Tess is destroyed by Alec and the machine with which he is symbolically associated, but Alec is destroyed by it too. Like Tess atop the steam thresher, unable to do anything but respond to the machine, Alec’s whole character is collapsed into a functional association. His alignment with the machine means that he becomes a machine, and the resulting distortion of his character—the reduction of his humanity—implicitly critiques the force he represents.

There is some evidence that Hardy was not at all perturbed by the machine-made deformations of Tess. It is perhaps a mark of narrative sympathy that the novel itself undergoes the deprivations to which it subjects its heroine; and though Tess suffers, deformed in plot and character, from its association with the machine, Hardy seems to have felt that such narrative distortions were the very stuff of art. In a frequently quoted passage from the Life and Work, composed while he was preparing the serial version of Tess in 1890, Hardy wrote:

Art is a disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence “realism” is not Art. (Life and Work, p. 239)

Hardy’s comments on realism in the Life and Work suggest what we might call an aesthetic of distortion in the mechanical defects of Tess. If “realism is not Art,” it would seem that the lapses of realism in Tess—the distorted characters and improbable plot devices—constitute the “Art” of the novel and the substance of Hardy’s vision. The result is, of course, problematic—but so are the circumstances that the novel represents. Tess’s indictment of a particular modern reality depends upon narrative deformations that jeopardize its success as a realistic novel; yet the ostensible defects—the distortions of narrative realism—constitute an authentic representation of the reality portrayed. The novel subjects itself to the machine in order to expose the machine, and its success as a representation depends upon its implication in the mechanical tyranny it discloses. Tess of the d’Urbervilles is not a mere “copy” or “inventory” of life under the influence of modernization; it is rather an image of life distorted—thrown
out of proportion—by machinery. In the very imperfections of its realism, *Tess* discloses the deformations that really “matter” in the reality represented—deformations that, according to the *Life and Work*, would probably be overlooked in a more perfectly realistic work.

Through a twist of critical fate that the wry Thomas Hardy would undoubtedly have enjoyed, the significance of narrative deformation in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* was overlooked for about a century. The critical tradition, in its concern to moderate Hardy’s faults as a realist writer—to give substance to his two-dimensional villain and to justify the clunking determinism of his plot—necessarily neglected the innovative, even revolutionary side of *Tess*’s strange distortions. Current work, however, increasingly seeks to remedy the defects of a critical practice that attempts to elide or ameliorate Hardy’s ostensible faults, and such a correction makes it possible to understand Hardy’s formal radicalism and to appreciate it in new ways—to distinguish the paradoxical but determined relationship between his “defective” realism and his formal commitment to real historical problems. Though *Tess* is apparently improved, as a realist novel, by its symbolic indictment of mechanization, the symbolic dimension does not alter the narrative deformities enforced by the machine. Rather, it depends upon them. Hardy could certainly have written a novel composed of convincing characters and plausible situations; instead, he chose to expose his novel to the machine, actually putting it through the industrial deformations that he wished to represent. The result is a “defective” work of realism, yet the very defects of the novel draw attention, in their inexorable, mechanical operation, to the defects of modern life and the deforming processes of machine culture.

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ABSTRACT
Zena Meadowsong, “Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*” (pp. 225–248)

This essay argues that Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), long read as a novel concerned with the industrial demolition of agrarian England, internalizes the problem of mechanization at the level of both story and narrative form. The narrative “defects” of which critics typically complain—“mechanical” plot devices, “two-dimensional” characterization, and obtrusions of tone and style—are, this essay argues, intentional distortions of realism designed to draw attention to the consequences of industrialization. In a crucial scene, Tess Durbeyfield is enslaved to a monster machine, a diabolical steam thresher. Dramatizing the onset of mechanization, this scene aligns the fate of the novel’s heroine with the fate of the preindustrial world she inhabits and, introducing a subtle distortion of realism in the mythic rendering of the monster, connects the narrative’s apparent defects to a critique of the industrial order. The “mechanical” plot of the novel, linked to the operation of actual machines, draws attention to the inexorable brutality of the historical forces that drive it; the “two-dimensional” villain, a double for the diabolical machine, dramatizes—in the functional reduction of his humanity—the personal consequences of mechanization; and the narrative’s tonal inconsistencies, apparently satirizing the calamities it itself engineers, demonstrate its implication in a mechanical system it cannot both escape and expose. Enacting the ravages of industrialization, the novel in a sense becomes the mechanical monster it represents; yet in doing so, it renders a powerful, formal indictment of mechanization.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy; *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*; monstrosity; mechanization; realism