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ROMANCE NARRATIVE IN HARDY'S *A PAIR OF BLUE EYES*

By John P. Farrell

I. The Coherence of an "Incoherent" Novel

Thomas Hardy came to the writer's life with prodigious endowments and little self-confidence. His struggle with this unlikely predicament shows up repeatedly in his career, but nowhere so often as in its early stages. The *"Studies and Specimens" Notebook*, completed in the mid-1860s, bears touching witness to the labor of a greatly gifted writer teaching himself the very rudiments of literary form. The editors of the notebook speak accurately of the "diligence and doggedness" of his striving (Dalziel and Millgate xv). At the time his striving was dedicated to mastering poetry, the first and always most favored of his muses. But in 1867 "under the stress of necessity" he shifted his focus to "a kind of literature in which he had hitherto taken but little interest – prose fiction" (*Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* 58).[1] With varying results he turned to writing novels, still testing his vocation until 1873 when he published *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* which, together with his impending marriage, fixed his literary course for decades to come.[2]

Hardy acknowledged that he began as a novelist while "he was feeling his way to a method" (*Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* 3),[3] a process that, in effect, continued throughout his career and that accounts for the familiar, often complex hybrid quality of narrative discourse in his novels. Hardy's pastoralism, gothicism, sensationalism, and melodrama feature frequently from novel to novel, always developing in conjunction with the dominating discourse of Victorian social realism and often, indeed, acting within the text as anti-realisms since Hardy was never convinced by the epistemological or moral assumptions that attended the realist perspectives of his contemporaries (Nemesvari 107).

Though Hardy accommodated his writing to the surfaces of social realism he resisted most of its specialized resources such as Trollope's "small diplomacies of everyday life" (R. H. Hutton qtd. in Skilton 115) or the spacious demystifications of George Eliot or the gritty polemics of George Gissing. It is the braiding of various genres that distinguishes his narrative discourse, allowing him to combine his evocations of moral experience and the hazards of ordinary life with the disturbances of fear, guilt, and desire that the various anti-realisms embedded in their projects. He deliberately undermined "the detachment of realist rhetoric" (Nemesvari 105) and infused his fiction with dilemmas of moral consciousness and problematic meanings that could not be grounded or justified in any authoritative system of

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mimesis. For these purposes, romance narrative had a powerful appeal for Hardy. As the preeminent mode of anti-realism it remained rooted in the legitimacy of familiar tradition – always key for Hardy – even though it had lately been pushed to the periphery of the literary estate by the empiricist foundations of most Victorian writing.

Hardy's fundamental perspective on romance narrative is suggestively evoked in "An Ancient to Ancients" where he remembers "sprightlier times" when the genre flourished in the hands of writers like Scott, Bulwer, Dumas, and Tennyson (*Complete Poems* 4; 25–26).[4] In the contemporary world, however, "Throbbing romance has waned and wanned; / No wizard wields the witching pen" (23–24). As his list of romancers indicates, the genre instanced the crossing of the prose–poetry divide. Its double-voicing is palpable in *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* which seems "no less obviously the work of a poet who happened to write novels . . . than of a novelist who wrote poems" (Taylor 33). The verse chapter headings of the novel appeal to a reader who responds to the articulations of poetic form as much as to the sequences of narrative order. To a very large extent the poetics of Hardy's prose enabled the textures of romance narrative to re-emerge within the conventions of his social realism.

Hardy continued to have his doubts about the orientation of his narrative art even after he published *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. In 1875, motivated more by his anxieties than by his actual performance, he wrote that

> he was committed by [economic] circumstances to novel-writing as a regular trade [and] hence he would . . . have to look for material in manners – in ordinary social and fashionable life as other novelists did. Yet he took no interest in manners, but in the substance of life only. So far what he had written had not been novels at all, as usually understood – that is pictures of modern customs and observances – and might not long sustain the interest of the circulating library subscriber. (*LW* 107)

But Hardy, it appears, was incapable of resisting the interweaving of referential modes. He does with genre just what he does with other formative structures such as time, space, and perspective that so demonstrably take on a hybrid quality in his texts. Romance narrative gave him discursive tools that were pat to his purpose and, in the case of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, suited the matter of the novel in three compelling ways. First, the novel is deeply indebted to Hardy's courtship of Emma Gifford, a romantic experience charmingly recounted by both Hardy and Emma (*LW* 66–82). Private romance and literary romance, while a very different thing, could not fail to coalesce as Hardy's love life and writing life so decisively intersected. Secondly, his restoration of romance narrative gave him an occasion to play off his emerging anti-realist aesthetic against the expected scenes of "ordinary social and fashionable life" that he recognized as both a necessary accommodation and as potentially lethal to the poetic essence of his narrative art. The interaction of these genres and their structures of feeling becomes a major theme in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.[5] Thirdly, Hardy wrote *A Pair of Blue Eyes* under the influence not only of his romance with Emma Gifford but of the environment where the courtship was enacted, the "romantic land of Lyonnesse," the name he always applied to Cornwall and that he celebrated as an inherently enchanting realm (*LW* 78, 82). The domain he designates in these terms happens to be the epicenter of a romantic narrative that recurrently appears in Hardy's work, the story of Tristan and Isolde.[6] *A Pair of Blue Eyes* pivots around a disguised retelling of this immensely influential story. Hardy's novel expanded the original's set of male lovers from two to four so that male identity becomes a matter of class rather

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than rank, and he compressed the female lovers from two into one so that instead of rival Isoldes we get both Isoldes merged as different phases of the self-divided Elfride. Elfride's great struggle in Hardy's novel is to preserve her spiritedness amidst the class values and coercive scripts that are forced on her and that, indeed, she even forces on herself in a drama of self-alienation (Wolfreys 30, 84–86). The story of Tristan and Isolde, together with several other key romance narratives that Hardy incorporates into his novel, contextualize the crisis points in Elfride's life and locate the liminal sites that mark her effort to be whole.

The next section of this essay will demonstrate at some length the shaping force of romance narrative in Hardy's novel, but we must first return to the hybrid quality of its genre initiatives as the source of the text's problematic narrative structure. And perhaps it should be said that *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is due some emphasis on its structural integrity since it has so often dismayed readers who take serious issue with the question of the novel's cohesiveness. One notable critic has written that the "contradictions in character, motive and narrative voice leave finally a web of incoherence which is not resolved by the ending" (Ebbatson 37). Another no less distinguished critic suggests that Hardy "teases us by hinting at a solidity and coherence that might lie behind the manifestly vaporous and contradictory text" (Kincaid 209). Even the author of the most recent – and generally excellent – introduction to the novel sees it as teetering "precariously between tragedy and farce and between realism and romance" as it traces, "through a clumsy transition from one dramatic mode to another," the muddled plot of its heroine's life (Dolin xxviii, xxxiv). Feminist critiques have lately made a much more welcoming case both for the novel in general and Elfride in particular though *A Pair of Blue Eyes* remains for many a novel that "seems ambivalently both to endorse and refute [Victorian] stereotypes of gender" (Ebbatson 28).[7] Behind the sense of incoherence that even sympathetic readings tend to highlight there clearly remains some of the outright exasperation that infiltrates much modern criticism and that was given memorable expression by the wonderfully flummoxed response of William Lyon Phelps who remembered being so distraught by the ending of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* that when he "finished the last page, [he] released a howl like timber wolf . . . hurled the volume against the wall . . . went to bed and remained there for a week" (qtd. in Dessner 154). I suspect that within Phelps's colorful rhetoric there are echoes of exclamations by many readers not only about the novel's ending but also about its several assaults on readerly forbearance. And yet I would argue that if we allow the figure of romance its due place, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* becomes, if not utterly coherent, a quite shapely and imposing narrative whose achievement begins with its protracted torquing of realist and romance elements in its discursive formation.

It goes nearly without saying that the agenda of Victorian social realism is manifest in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. As so often happens in Victorian fiction, the fateful conjunction of the market economy and the marriage market centers the novel's plot developments. We are introduced to a social scene that is pervasively molded by questions of class position and privilege while, simultaneously, the novel is much concerned with the identity of the private person as well as with the psychology and morality of individual choices (Brooks 12). These preoccupations, in keeping with realism's prescriptions, are generally welded together with empirically grounded assumptions about time and space, and they are reinforced by a show of confidence in a binding rational order. There is fine economy in the way Hardy demonstrates in single, often simple episodes, how the various aspects of this agenda act in conjunction. Early in the novel Elfride's father, the snob-in-chief, Reverend Swancourt of Endelstow, reaches for his *Landed Gentry* in order to work out a distinguished pedigree for

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his unheralded guest, Stephen Smith, who, he instantly assumes, must be up to a respectable class standard: "Mr. Smith, I congratulate you upon your blood" (19; ch. 3). It is a major crisis in the novel when Swancourt discovers that Stephen, Elfride's suitor, actually comes from a cottager's background. Swancourt himself marries the wealthy Mrs. Troyton (at which point he and Elfride move to a grander Endelstow house) and it is this second Mrs. Swancourt who good-naturedly places before Elfride the annals of class conflict, inflated egoism, and dubious morals that compose so much of Victorian realism's core materials. At a critical juncture in the plot all three Swancourts travel to London for the season. Mrs. Swancourt becomes her stepdaughter's tutelary spirit at this stage; she "considerably enlarged Elfride's ideas in an aristocratic direction," while introducing her to the "gaiety" of the Drive and the Row (129; ch. 14). Here Hardy is revisiting the novelistic territory of his unpublished first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which he described as being in part a satire on London society (*LW* 62–63). The older woman is candid about her qualifications to instruct Elfride in the semiotics of London social life: "I have learnt the language of . . . artificiality; and the fibbing of eyes, the contempt of nose-tips . . . and the various emotions lying in walking-stick twirls, hat liftings, and the elevation of parasols" (130; ch.14).

The episodes in London are indispensable to the layered constituents of realism and romance in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Hardy almost always matches separate genres in his texts with corresponding locales or regions. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for example, the pastoral mode frames the period of Tess's innocence, but it gives way to the threatening gothicism of the d' Urberville lands and estates as innocence yields to experience. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* London functions as the proving ground of the novel's social realism. The novel, then, makes a sharp contrast between London, on the one hand, and on the other, the "romantic land of the Lyonnesse" where we began (*LW* 82). The action of the novel situates us first in the environment of romance, at the narrative center of the Tristan and Isolde story, but goes on to narrate extended episodes in the cathedral of social realism as the coercions and delusions of class society and the marriage market begin to dominate the action.

The generic initiatives of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* thus reflect in the movement of its plot a compressed account of the historical development from romance's witching pen to the Victorian novel's Biedermeier brushstrokes, its concern with manners, its "pictures of modern customs and observances." This is not an uncharacteristic maneuver. Hardy habitually mirrored in his novels the moves, strategies, and tensions that underlie the making of their narratives (as in *Jude the Obscure*'s monumental struggle of letter and spirit or *The Well-Beloved*'s treatment of plot as an examination of plotting). In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* we begin with a character, Elfride, who, as "Ernest Field," has written a romance and is about to live one. Another character, the pointedly named Henry Knight, briefly becomes a metaphoric ensign of textual production and romantic plotting. In the perilous cliff scene, Knight confronts deep time itself, as he sees the cliff's geological layers "closed up like a fan before him," resembling the successive chapters of a book that can be "read" (200–01; ch. 22). His reading makes accessible the striations of time forming, as it were, both a text and, "[f]urther back and overlapped," its prodigious intertexts in a developmental display of hybrid genres (200).[8]

As readers of a composite narrative structure we are in Knight's position and see a foreground dominated by the style of social realism while in the background the witching pen's work becomes more and more evident. Hardy was always quite clear about the ineradicable presence of romance tradition in all literary forms: "Romanticism will exist

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in human nature as long as human nature itself exists. The point is (in imaginative literature) to adopt that form of romanticism which is the mood of the age" (*LW* 151). His view does not differ substantially from Northrop Frye's forthright declaration a generation ago: "Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folk tale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction" (15). Hardy's thinking about the romantic side of familiar things – to borrow Dickens's famous formulation in the brief "Preface" to *Bleak House* – no doubt owes something to Scott's influential 1822 "Essay on Romance," which judiciously counterpoints romance and the novel (Dolin xxxvi). Hardy also strikingly anticipates the bold epistemological account that Henry James would later offer: "The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later in one way or another. . . . The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things . . . we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our own thought and desire" (31–32).

As the torquing of romance and realism incorporates into *A Pair of Blue Eyes* a reflexive history of fiction's progression from medieval romance to Victorian novel, the progression in itself provides an externally coherent structure or plot. The structure is reinforced by discrete episodes that function as commentaries on the romance-realism conflict of values. Early on we learn that Elfride, after shopping in Castle Boterel, had a mishap with her two purchases. They slipped from her arms: "On one side of her, three volumes of fiction lay kissing the mud; on the other numerous skeins of polychromatic wools lay absorbing it . . . . [Her] blue eyes turned to sapphires, and the cheeks crimsoned with vexation" (102; ch. 11). There is a little allegory at play here. The novel kissing the mud reflects the scandal of realist fiction, its dependence on materiality, and its awkward linkages with the bourgeois culture of getting and spending. The "polychromatic wools" constitute the skein of romance, which, in these latter days, must be discolored by "absorbing" the grit of realism. However, while romance yields to realism in the formal history of the genres, for Hardy it survives with its own traces intact. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, the same troping of romance occurs: Farfrae's "curious double strands . . . the commercial and the romantic were very distinct at times. Like the colours in a variegated cord those contrasts could be seen intertwisted, yet not mingling" – an important distinction (161).

Even more instructive is the second major episode where Hardy aligns, and then distinguishes, the realistic and the romantic. Elfride discovers that Knight has reviewed her pseudonymous novel *The Court of King Arthur's Castle. A Romance of Lyonnesse* (36; ch. 5).[9] Knight attacks the romance as "simply devoted to impossible tournaments, towers, and escapades, which read like flat copies of . . . the most unreal portions of *Ivanhoe*" (138; ch. 15). The reviewer allows that "now-a-days" interest in a historical romance requires "the guidance of some nearly extinct species of legendary" and "an unweakened faith in the mediæval halo" (139; ch. 15). Instead the feeble book under review comes, preposterously, from "the hands of some young lady, hardly arrived at years of discretion" (138; ch. 15). Here Knight is echoing the common Victorian view that the mode of romance licenses the artificial and the illusory. However, Knight tosses Elfride an unexpected bouquet at the end of his review by commending her handling of the social realism that also appears in "Ernest Field's" narrative discourse: "We are far from altogether disparaging the author's powers," which, he says, come through where "social sympathies," and matters of "domestic experience" and the "natural touches which make people real" engage her talents and attention (139; ch. 15). Knight's words of respect are not offered as a salute to the prerogatives of

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social realism in contemporary fiction but as an encouragement to what Hardy would have called Elfride's idiosyncratic mode of regard. Her text, Knight says, reveals that the author "has a certain versatility that enables her to use with effect a style of narration peculiar to herself," a style that makes her much more successful in those portions of the novel "which have nothing whatever to do" with the swashbuckling story (139; ch. 15). In other words, Knight recognizes in Elfride the quality of creative subjectivity that, as Hardy repeatedly said, endows a writer's work, no matter the genre, with its authenticity: "the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone" (*LW* 158). In doing so the artist is guided by a deeper, uncontaminated realism, one that "*appeals to your individual eye and heart in particular*" (*LW* 191). Again and again the value and immediacy of this proto-Paterian aesthetic is thrown up against the sardonic pattern of claustrophobic repetition and return that often seems primarily to dictate the ontological exchanges between self and world in Hardy's writing. Knight's comment, it should be stressed, does not endorse the aesthetic of social realism in fiction. It endorses the writer's individual talent. Since we never see any of Elfride's text, we cannot know if his critique is justified. But at least we know the kind of thing that forms his opinion since *A Pair of Blue Eyes* itself is rich with realism's project: its assumptions about the near identity of material and spiritual well-being, its mystified acquiescence in social hierarchies, and its emphasis on manners.

Though Knight may be valuing the discourse of social realism on Elfride's behalf, Hardy is not claiming kin with its modality on his own behalf. With truly trenchant irony Hardy elevates the notes of romance, especially in the Lyonnesse environment, by undertaking a stunning transformation of the novel's perceptual orders. The sturdy realism of Hardy's story, the sort of thing at which Knight believes Elfride's novel excels, is left to sputter limply by the narrator of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, while the notes of romance, puerile in Knight's estimate, acquire poetic force in the narrator's discourse. The sturdy realism that appears dominant in the novel becomes, in effect, blind to its typical novelistic universe, inept, as it were, at carrying its own tune. A conspicuous example is the bold pattern of Elfride's successive suitors. The pattern reads as stair steps for a social climber, a favorite plot device in Victorian marriage market novels. Elfride begins with the déclassé Felix, moves to the marginally acceptable Stephen, progresses to the highly placed Knight, and concludes by marrying a *bona fide* aristocrat, Lord Luxellian. Her fortunes in this marriage and class marketplace seem to provide a core structure in the novel's plot development. But, in fact, the implications of the structure never register in the novel's dance of desire and expectation. Though the narrator pays much attention to Elfride's individual choices, and certainly a good deal of attention to the contrast between Stephen and Knight, there is never any reflection on the sequence as such. Elfride, of course, is aware that Knight's social standing has "a little to do" with her renunciation of Stephen (236; ch. 27), but the bracketing points of the sequence, Felix and Luxellian, are radically minimized, shrouded, in fact, by the text's indifference to its own neat hierarchy. What is at issue is not, of course, a question of narrative economy: Hardy might have paid even less attention to Felix and Luxellian had he wished. It is a question, instead, of the carefully constructed sequence, so unmistakably a property of Victorian social realism, remaining without any wind in its narrative sails.

Something important rather than haphazard is going on here. The narrative discourse and the interweaving of genres in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* completely reverse the aesthetic formulae of Knight's review. Hardy's own intrinsic discourse disengages from the plot patterns of

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social realism, which is Elfride's natural mode of regard according to Knight, and, instead, foregrounds the romance elements of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, implicitly claiming for the novel's omniscient narrator a level of authenticity missing from his social realism. Hardy the writer is offering himself as the contrary to Elfride the writer. He is clearing a narrative space for the efficacy of the wizard's work.

My argument here is premised on the absence of narrative stamina not only with respect to the succession of Elfride's suitors, but to other, equally otiose materials taken from the repertoire of social realism's characteristic discourse. For example, the novel discloses, in a revelatory scene that takes place in the Luxellian crypt, an elaborate family history that constitutes a narrative in itself, one filled with implications for the plot of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. We learn that Elfride is named after her grandmother who, like Elfride, eloped, and further that her own father, Swancourt, eloped with her mother, his first wife, and also a Luxellian: "That trick of running away seems to be handed down in families, like craziness or gout" (234–35; ch. 26). So Elfride is nearly as much a Luxellian as she is a Swancourt. Since her father dissipated his first's wife's money, Elfride's marriage could be framed as a restoration plot within the marriage and marketplace traditions. Yet the novel produces these fascinating details as, at most, background without very much consequence in the arc of its narrative. The details no doubt support Hardy's preoccupation with the burdensome déjà vu of "sires and gammers . . . doubled and doubled till they become a vast body of Gothic ladies and gentlemen" (*Trumpet Major* 17). But they mark no transformative place in this novel's plot or in its presentation of Elfride's character. We are miles here from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. We only learn that Elfride's sad history has itself a sad history.

Another bypassed opportunity for engaging the conventional disposition of Victorian realist narrative occurs in the development of Stephen Smith from the son of a cottager to an "illustrious" man who prospered in India while Elfride's affections drifted in the direction of Knight (338; ch. 38). Stephen's story belongs in the library of Victorian self-improvement narratives. However, the only ones who acknowledge Stephen's rise are his parents and a few townspeople. The narrative itself seems indifferent to shining tales of upward mobility. Another case in point is our discovery at the very end of the novel that Unity, Elfride's former maid, and Martin Cannister, the local sexton, have married and have become the proprietors of a "recently repaired and entirely modernized" establishment called the "Welcome Home" (350; ch. 40). While this turn of the plot certainly reflects a changing socioeconomic scene often described by Hardy, no preparation and no consequence attends its insertion into this narrative. This oddly introduced information seems more like a marginal scribble than a thematic node.

The feature common to all these episodes is narrative default. *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, as a realist narrative, evokes conventional plot lines and protocols to ground the action, but leaves the conventions to do all the work. The episodes are very much the equivalent of the "sentry paths" that Elfride discovers "coming from nowhere and leading nowhere" on each side of the privet hedge separating the properties of Rev. Swancourt and Mrs. Troyton (101; ch. 11). Her father later explains: "I courted her through the privet hedge yonder. . . . [E]verything was terribly matter-of-fact" (114–115; ch. 12). This flattening of romance and courtship into prosaic love-making is a judgment on the negotiated marriage settlements that fuel the plots of numerous novels in the Victorian period. And just so that we do not miss the point, Hardy juxtaposes Swancourt on his sentry path with the feverish flight Elfride undertakes by agreeing to elope with Stephen. She is so unready to allow conventions to guide her action that

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she desperately resorts to giving her pony its head at the outset of her journey. She vows that Pansy shall decide whether she meets Stephen or not. The pony stands "crosswise, looking up and down. Elfride's heart throbbed erratically" as she pursues her risky, emotionally charged adventure (104; ch. 11). In the novel's first phase, Elfride's instincts always roused her to passionate romance even if she, at last, was stalled by a "miserable strife of thought" (103; ch. 11). As her friendship with Stephen begins to blossom, she hints revealingly at the stirring self-conception that inspires her highly developed sense of adventure: "Do I seem like La belle dame sans merci?" she asks one day as she rides horseback while Stephen walks alongside her (53; ch. 7). Elfride never, not even when she marries Luxellian, seeks marriage as a socioeconomic blessing. Hardy treats all such business as predictable sentry paths, but he colors Elfride's story with the gleaming light of Keatsian romance.

II. The Form and Figure of Romance

THOUGH AT SOME LEVEL of her fantasy life Elfride conceives of a resemblance between herself and "La belle dame sans merci," her fantasy will ultimately fail. Undoubtedly, she holds her lovers in thrall, but she never succeeds as a femme fatale. Beneath her question to Stephen there is even a flash of Elfride's narcissism. Yet if she fails to summon a Keatsian alter-ego during her outing with Stephen, or for Knight when, once more, she would put the same "saucy" question as she rides and he walks, a clear aptness of allusion registers in Hardy's text all the same.

> I set her on my pacing steed,
> And nothing else saw all day long,
> For sidelong would she bend and sing
> A faery's song. (53–54; ch. 7)

Elfride, in twice devising this tableau with her "knight-at-arms," exemplifies how Hardy subtly incises the grain of his "realistic" text with spare but unmistakable traces of romance narrative. He gives us, as he once said, "half and quarter views" of the whole picture so that we may see, as in a hologram, what is partly intrinsic in the text and partly educed by context, allusion, and genre (*THPW* 137).

Such capturing of cryptic possibilities is at the center of what Hardy means by the "visionary" – his virtual synonym for "romantic" (*LW* 76). The epicenter of the visionary is that "region of dream and mystery" (*THPW* 7), the romantic land of Lyonnesse where Elfride sojourns first with Stephen and then with Knight, and where Hardy sojourned with Emma Gifford and even walked alongside her as she rode on horseback (*LW* 73). Under the powerful promptings of love, language, and poetic perception Hardy created *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, etching into it the shadow-drama of a romantic narrative staged at a bewitching locale, the place where your eyes glisten with magic.

In turn, the novel begins by gazing into Elfride's magical eyes:

> These eyes were blue; blue as the autumn distance – blue as the blue we see between the retreating mouldings of hills and woody slopes on a sunny September morning. A misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked *into* rather than *at*. (7; ch. 1)

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The concluding distinction marks an essential difference. The blue that we look *at* describes a fetching and memorable feature of Elfride; it refers us to a material phenomenon. The blue that we look *into* refers us to a beauty indefinite in physical form, emanating from distant, exquisite transitions, and identifying not so much a moment as "a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by" (Pater 151).

Though the distinction applies to Elfride's pair of blue eyes in the first instance, it inevitably applies to *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the text itself, as a thing to be looked into as well as looked at. By looking at the text we encounter its empiricist realism, its irreducible mimesis of the material world. But looking into the text reveals – to use Paul Ricoeur's terms – mimesis unfolding as poiesis, or, to be quite specific, realism unfolding as romantic narrative (39).[10] Virginia Woolf famously described Hardy's margin of the unexpressed: "It is as if Hardy himself were not quite aware of what he did" (258). Woolf's discussion, astute as it is, leaves Hardy a bit marooned in his own writing, whereas he actually is, like a cubist painter, constructing a simultaneity of forms that requires different kinds of looking.[11] He displaces material reality as the basis of representation and, as an entailment of the same procedure, he declines to identify the real with the representational: "The material is not the real, the real being invisible optically" (*LW* 186). It may be, as Linda Shires suggests, that Hardy grants reality to ultimate sources while regarding them as "unrecoverable and layered over by natural changes and sediments of cultural constructs" (144).

Romantic discourse in Hardy recognizes the sedimentary character of his narratives and the indubitable poiesis of their construction. The recognition occurs primarily on two planes of his textual constructs. There are recurring reminders of the "witching pen" that was once wielded by wizards (Knight's "nearly extinct species of legendary" [139; ch. 25]). These are built into Hardy's texts by a complex network of allusions. And then there is Hardy's commitment to the romantic or visionary as an ineradicable mode of mind.[12] For Hardy, romance narrative, when used as a backdrop or counter-statement within the prevailing practices of Victorian realism, creates an enriched epistemology. It reflects the novelistic text's capacity for reaching beyond the merely "optical" or "scenic" presentations so much favored – mistakenly – by the realist program, while endowing the text, in the best cases, with the visionary power of art (*LW* 192). Hardy said that his art was composed so as "to intensify the expression of things . . . so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible" (*LW* 183). This comment, combined with his notes a few pages later in which he declares that the real is "invisible optically" (*LW* 192), makes clear that Hardy subordinated "optical" or material reality to a more substantive level of reality only to be penetrated by "the imaginative reason" (*LW* 151).

Hardy used this reverberant term from Matthew Arnold to designate the form of imagination that sees "*into the heart of a thing*" and which attains to "realism" of a more profound quality than any focus on reproduction can achieve (*LW* 151). Later in his notes he describes his strategic perception as an aspiration "to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic" (*LW* 192) and in one of his best poems he referred, as if to define the imaginative reason, to "the intenser/ Stare of the mind" ("In Front of the Landscape," *CP* 304). He even concluded, quite exceptionally for his time, with the Aristotelian principle that neither history nor nature can serve as an adequate model for fiction since fiction, "like the highest artistic expression in other modes, is more true" than either (*THPW*117). The basis of Hardy's aesthetics is his reiterated conviction that realist writing is no less an artifice than romantic writing. He sees the role of romantic narrative, like the role played by melodrama and

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gothicism, as a way to disrupt the sovereignty and transparency claimed by the mimetic mode.

Hardy thus opens a door to the transcendent by reviving the figure of romance even as he abides the desacralized universe comprehended in his characteristic recourse to melodrama, gothicism, and tragic irony. Though all of these modes allow for the discovery of ethical forces, only the figure of romance hints at any restoration of the visionary. What Hardy produces, then, both in his manipulation of colliding genres and in the priority he sometimes settles on romance is his version of the cultural uncanny, a déjà vu that hovers between memory and desire.[13] The status of romance in Hardy is, once again, a matter of seeing, an order of perspective. At the very end of his sinuous essay on "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," he paraphrased Carlyle: "Truly it has been observed that 'the eye sees that which it brings with it the means of seeing'" (*THPW* 125). The eye of romance takes us to the borders of the wizard's world.

One of the most memorable scenes in all of Hardy's fiction occurs in *Jude the Obscure* when the young Jude first visits Christminster and hears, as he walks by the colleges and churches, the words of Oxford "worthies" carried by the breeze and "making him comrades" (73, 74; ch. 12). The scene localizes a phenomenon that in various shapes appears throughout Hardy's writing in a vast gathering of allusions, echoes, and epigraphs. Hardy, of course, has been much mocked by this display and frequently charged with a compulsion, deriving from his class and educational insecurities, to show off his cultural credentials. But Penny Boumelha is surely right to see Hardy's references to art and literature as a way to place his own writing firmly within the framework of "what one of his writer-protagonists calls 'all that has been done in literature from Moses down to Scott'" (245). Hardy's use of allusions is a self-conscious intervention in the tradition of aesthetic creation by a writer who knew perfectly well that "in fiction there can be no intrinsically new thing at this stage of the world's history" (*THPW* 114). His allusions constitute an extension of the inherent value he saw in perpetuated signs of human use and custom, the ingenerate traces of lingering presence in his encounters with apparent absence: the feet that "have left the wormholed flooring, /That danced to the ancient air" ("Song to an Old Burden," *CP* 1–2).

In what follows I will be looking at a coil of allusions to three romance narratives that Hardy wove into *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in a way that decisively anchors the novel in their plots, their conflicts, and their portrayal of their main characters. But Hardy's use of intertexts is never straightforward. In his classic study of 1 Samuel as a crucial intertext in *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* Julian Moynahan demonstrated that "the Saul-David conflict represents a kind of framing action for the main dramatic situation of the novel. . . . Henchard *is* Saul just as Farfrae is David" (129). The romance narratives Hardy uses in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* create just such framing actions, though the correspondences between characters are often less symmetrical. Moynahan's model is probably less frequent in Hardy's writing than the instance developed by Jane Millgate in her study of *The Bride of Lammermoor* as intertext in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: "It is not so much a matter of Hardy deliberately reworking elements from Scott as his using the earlier novel as a kind of grid against which he can plot the design of his own" (732). Millgate's view allows Hardy's idiosyncratic mode of regard its essential function. Her model is well illustrated in another *Tess* intertext very relevant to the present discussion: the romance of Tristan and Isolde. In the romance Tristan's mother, knowing she will die shortly after the birth of her son, prophetically names the baby "Sorrow" (i.e., Tristan). Hardy uses the same situation but in *Tess* it is the son who dies and the mother

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who lives. The source text operates as a mooring point for Hardy's variations. We will see several similar instances as Hardy enables his complex of romance narratives to perform their encircling action in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

The first source text that performs such an action comes – not unexpectedly – from Tennyson whose poetry provided Hardy with many allusions and chapter epigraphs in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Tennyson published *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* in 1869 (dated 1870), a volume that nearly completed the *Idylls* and that contained "Pelleas and Ettarre," a romance narrative that figures very significantly in Hardy's Lyonnesse novel. The *Life* records (though without specifying any titles) that Hardy and Emma were reading Tennyson in August 1870 (81). Presumably they were reading the latest *Idylls*; in any case it is clear that Hardy carefully echoed "Pelleas and Ettarre" when he came to write *A Pair of Blue Eyes* less than two years later. The curious and painfully broken relationship that Stephen Smith has with Knight, on the one hand, and Elfride on the other, is projected by the dark disloyalties enacted in Tennyson's poem. Pelleas, a young knight, is the victor at "The Tournament of Youths" and dreams of a damsel to love. Impetuously, he chooses Ettarre. In his innocence he cannot judge Ettarre's scornful manner, and he does not hear her mutter: "I have lighted on a fool" (108). Even though she has encouraged his suit, she abruptly leaves the site of the tournament. When Pelleas tries to follow her, she tells her retinue that he is not man enough for her:

> I cannot bide Sir Baby. Keep him back . . . .
> And pamper him with papmeat, if you will. (183; 188)

Pelleas believes Ettarre is only performing the conventional role of the reluctant maiden. Even when she sends three knights against him (whom he vanquishes), he remains exuberantly her champion. She again gets rid of him by having her gates barred to him. In his sorry – but still smitten – situation he is found by Sir Gawain who happens to be passing. Gawain is shocked to see this new knight, so recently victorious, subjected to such treatment. Pelleas persists in his infatuation: "I shall see her face; /Else must I die thro' mine unhappiness" (323–24). Gawain pledges to intercede for his young colleague but, for three days, while Pelleas waits, mendacious Gawain seduces the very willing Ettarre. Pelleas finally loses patience:

> Then he crost the court,
> And spied not any light in hall or bower,
> But saw the postern portal also wide
> Yawning; and up a slope of garden . . .
> . . . *was he ware of three pavilions . . .*
> *And in the third . . . were Gawain and Ettarre*. (409–426; italics added)

They were using the pavilion as their trysting place and even the naïve Pelleas cannot deny what he sees going on between the mature Gawain and the sensuous lady. This is a devastating moment, not only for Pelleas, but for Camelot since Gawain and Ettarre are clearly proxies for Lancelot and Guinevere. Ettarre is more boldly lascivious than Guinevere. She reiterates her rejection of "Sir Baby" by declaring she would rather have "Some rough old knight who knew the worldly way, / Albeit grizzlier than a bear, to ride / And jest with" (185–87).

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A Pair of Blue Eyes duplicates in detail this scene from Tennyson's *Idylls*. From the beginning the novel had emphasized Stephen's descent from "Sir Baby" by making him "a youth in appearance, and not yet a man in years." He has "a boy's blush" and a "pretty face" (14; ch. 2). Returning one night to Endelstow earlier than expected he sees two figures strolling across a garden "to an octagonal *pavilion* called the Belvedere" (223; ch. 25; italics added). He peers into the pavilion and, in the light of a flaring match, he sees "a strongly illuminated picture" of faithless love as Knight embraces Elfride. Driving home the grimness of the moment, the narrator describes how the scene "reached Stephen's eyes through the horizontal bars of woodwork, which crossed their forms like the ribs of a skeleton (224–25; ch. 25). The romance atmosphere of the Lyonnesse world withers at this point. The chapters following reveal the death of Lady Luxellian, the excruciating meeting of Stephen, Knight, and Elfride in the Luxellian crypt where the "the deed of deception" is affirmed (248; ch. 27), and the ominous return of the narrative action to London where "columns of smoke stand up in the still air like tall trees" (261; ch. 29). Even though the second half of the novel is much concerned with its constant reminder of romance (Mr. Knight), and uses some of the genre's plenary language, the force of the figure steadily droops against the lurid backdrop of the Belvedere.

The intensity of Elfride's feelings for Knight changes her status in the scheme of the romance narrative. She has "given up her position as queen of the less [Stephen] to be vassal of the greater" (285; ch. 31). But her assimilation to the undercurrents of romance narrative only becomes clear once the patterns of the Tristan and Isolde story begin to govern Hardy's plot. Again we must allow for Hardy's creatively configured appropriation of the medieval narrative. The Arthurian tale is played out among four main characters: King Mark, his young nephew Tristan of Lyonnesse, and the two Isoldes – Isolde of Ireland (La Belle Isolde) and Isolde of Brittany (Isolde des Blanche Mains). The fateful relations of these four characters develop when King Mark asks Tristan to voyage to Ireland and return with La Belle Isolde to be his queen. On the voyage back Tristan and Isolde mistakenly drink a love potion that had been prepared for Isolde's wedding night. As a result the two become impassioned lovers, and much of the story concerns their furtive love-making as both wife and nephew deceive King Mark. Their dangerous affair ultimately leads Tristan to escape to Brittany. After much wandering he meets Isolde des Blanche Mains whose name signifies her character. Though Tristan will marry her, he continues to long for La Belle Isolde. After a year he returns stealthily to Cornwall where he and his lover reignite their amour. Their passion finally leads to the tale's catastrophe and the deaths of the lovers. In some versions, King Mark, learning at last of the magic potion, forgives his betrayers, while in other versions (e.g., Malory) it is Mark who kills Tristan.

Hardy had many different re-tellings of the story to use as sources. However, there are a few signature situations and characterizations that clearly originate in the romance while being echoed in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. I will turn to these in a moment, but, first, there are several contextual matters that must at least be glanced at since they so demonstrably relate to Hardy's intertwining of the two texts. The first is the re-discovery and proliferation of Tristan and Isolde narratives in the nineteenth century. In 1804 Sir Walter Scott published his seminal edition of *Sir Tristrem*, a work accompanied by a voluminous commentary in which Scott freely sketched episodes from a much earlier and more celebrated version by Gottfried von Strassburg. Hardy almost certainly knew Scott's work, probably in its re-issued edition of 1868. Then, as he was beginning work on *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, two formidable and

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original treatments of the subject appeared (in whole or in part): Swinburne's "Tristram and Iseult: Prelude to an Unfinished Poem" and Tennyson's "The Last Tournament."[14] Moreover, by the time Hardy's novel was developing, Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* had long been a sensation in Europe. Another widely known rendering of the story had been published in 1853. This was Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*. Arnold's version was republished in 1869 in his collected *Poems*, conveniently coming to hand in the midst of the Tristan cavalcade that immediately preceded *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

Even more important than this literary history was Hardy's personal history during the same period of four or five years. Hardy met and courted Emma Gifford in the very Lyonnesse precincts near Tintagel castle that frame the Arthurian romance. Hardy invoked this turning point in his life many times, frequently associating his courtship with aspects of the Tristan and Isolde story (as in "When I Set Out for Lyonnesse") and, in a late letter, he even called Emma "an Iseult of my own" (*Letters* 5: 179). As is apparent in many details, his romance with Emma provided him with significant material for *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and, in turn, he recycled extensive, nearly verbatim passages from *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in his late drama on Tristan and Isolde, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (Snell 114–17). He explained (in a freighted phrase) that the story of the *Queen of Cornwall* had been "smouldering in his mind for between forty and fifty years" (*LW* 81). And in a letter of 1923 he notes, more precisely, that the play was "53 years in contemplation," i.e., from the time he first met Emma in 1870 (*Letters* 6: 224).

There is, then, a direct line of connection extending from Hardy's romance in Lyonnesse to *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and then to works such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and ultimately to the *Queen of Cornwall.* Hardy blended passions and actions from the great medieval narrative into *A Pair of Blue Eyes* by re-drawing the main cast of characters. He expanded the set of male lovers in order to shift the emphasis in romance from king and court to the social system of the nineteenth century, and he compressed the female lovers from two into one so that instead of a rivalry of Isoldes we get an interiorized drama of Elfride as she experiences the fractures in her own divided self. Once Hardy's "cubist" rearrangement of these core details of the story is considered the Tristan and Isolde story becomes clearly legible in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, partly in its reproductions of characters and partly in its reproduction of events. The fraught relationship between King Mark and Tristan, who must deliver Isolde to his uncle, is duplicated in the way the naïve Stephen essentially ushers Elfride into Knight's arms. Stephen has already won Elfride for himself but he no sooner does so then he "frequently trumpeted in her ears" all of Knight's excellences (226; ch. 25). Elfride is puzzled: "Ah, always he – always he" (69; ch. 8). Soon Elfride "began to sigh for somebody further on in manhood. Stephen was hardly enough of a man" (236; ch. 27). In a development that plainly mirrors the romance narrative in the novelistic text, Elfride abandons placid affection for erotic connection. Hardy has so ordered the "grid" of his romance narrative that we are initially given both Stephen and Knight in the role of Tristan, but Stephen (the avatar of Sir Baby) cannot rise above the rank of squire. He fails ignominiously in the "knight service" Elfride requests of him (e.g., by forgetting to safeguard her earrings) (52, ch. 7). So Stephen, mired in his social and amatory shortcomings, is displaced from the Tristan position while the more suitable Knight succeeds him. Up to a point Knight fulfills this role admirably. He projects the commanding, resourceful personality of the original Tristan who, upon his arrival in Ireland, impresses the court with his many skills. Even at a young age Tristan is renowned for his prowess at hunting, harping, and, most significantly for our purposes,

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Figure 12. (Color online) “Tristan et Yseut buvant le philtre d’amour,” from Messire Lancelot du Lac, de Gaultier de Moap, 1470. BNF, Manuscrits (Fr. 112 fol. 239).

chess playing: “His skill in music, and at chess, and tables, astonishes [the court] . . . . [H]e becomes the instructor of the Princess Ysonde, who was attached to the studies of minstrelsy and poetry. He instructs her in those arts, as well as in chess . . . till she has no equal in the kingdom” (Scott 189–90). (See Figure 12.)

Hardy made the same crucial connection in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* between chess playing and courtship that occurs in innumerable medieval romances and that is a core element in many Tristan-Isolde texts. It is also depicted extensively in the rich iconography generated by the romance: “The tale lent itself easily to French conceptions of courtly love with many pictures of the lovers sharing wine, playing chess, or sitting under a tree” (Lambdin 367).[15] The most arresting literary image of the Tristan-Isolde courtship, a symbolically laden, often-repeated moment when the lovers simultaneously play chess and drink the forbidden potion as they sail to Tintagel, occurs in the *Prose Tristan*: “On the third day round about noon Tristan was playing chess with Iseult . . . . Tristan, who was feeling the heat, asked . . . for a drink and it so happened that they chanced upon the love potion . . . . Ah! God what a draught!” (86).[16]

Stephen agrees to a game of chess with Elfride, but she is his first real opponent and, in a forecast of their unsuccessful relationship, he proves no match for her; she, in turn, loses interest in his amateur play. Misguidedly, Stephen acknowledges his incompetence while at the same moment “wildly” declaring, “I must tell you how I love you” (50; ch. 7). The delicacy of romance as interplay is buried by Stephen’s “full-blown” impetuosity. He also contravenes the practices of courtly love by failing to enumerate and praise Elfride’s beauties: “What did you love me for?” Elfride asks. “Perhaps for your eyes. . . . They are

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indifferently good." "Well, what about my mouth?" He replies: "I thought it was a passable mouth." Stephen never blunts his unchivalric frankness (58; ch. 7).

Knight also indulges in rudely unchivalric behavior and Elfride becomes importunate in seeking courtly compliments from him. She has light hair, but he prefers dark. She draws attention to her crowning feature: "What coloured eyes do you like best?" His response is deflating: "I prefer hazel." The sequence concludes: "She had played and lost again" (166; ch. 28). Instead of chivalry, Elfride only receives Knight's "piquant snubbings" (236; ch. 27). Even Mrs. Swancourt, well disposed toward her kinsman, remarks on Knight's "unchivalrous sentiments" (282; ch. 30). Elfride herself is reduced to claiming the compliment Knight will not pay: "I don't care if you do say satire and judge me cruelly. I know my hair is beautiful; everybody says so" (255; ch. 28).

Though he fails in the chivalry of compliments, Knight is a dominating chess player. Even so, Hardy continues to alter the Tristan role as it applies to Knight. Instead of teaching his Isolde to perfect her game, he checkmates her at every opportunity and smiles "piteously" as he does so (157; ch. 18). As Elfride breaks down, Mrs. Swancourt has to reprove Knight sharply: "Cousin Knight, what were you thinking of? Her tender brain won't bear cudgelling like your great head" (161). At this unpromising stage of the Knight–Elfride relationship, the narrator creates another mirror image of the Tristan story. Knight leaves Endelstow and travels to Ireland on holiday. In doing so he reverses the dramatic action of the Tristan plot line. Knight leaves his "Isolde" in England rather than going to Ireland to seek her (since she is already in Cornwall). But a recollection of Tristan's enthralled experience in Ireland appears as Hardy uses Knight-in-Ireland to put in focus one of the novel's essential themes: as he travels from Cork to Dublin, Knight is excited by "images" of Elfride "which his mind did not act upon till the cause of them was no longer before him. [H]e appeared to himself to have fallen in love with her soul, which had temporarily assumed its disembodiment to accompany him on his way" (177; ch. 20).

As this passage suggests, Knight's merely cerebral thrill again demonstrates his incompetence as Tristan. At the same time, Stephen, like Pelleas, is too emotionally immature to fascinate anyone. Unlike Knight, Stephen is moved by the embodied Elfride but even so her image, "the special form of manifestation [she took] throughout the pages of his memory," is two-dimensional at best (21; ch. 3). Stephen always fails to see Elfride in full; he is satisfied with the captivating but static mental painting he has made of her. He never achieves any insight into the maturing, flawed person he believes he loves. Similarly, Knight, once in Ireland, preserves Elfride also as an image, but one that he constructs as the platonic form of the docile, virginal lover whose most wonderful attraction – he believes – is in her having had no experience of desire. Contrary to the impulsive Stephen who promptly, though artlessly, seeks Elfride's kisses, Knight is encased in an emotional suit of armor, and he expects his beloved to have followed the same dress code. He has no grasp of the real knowledge that the emotional life brings and can only love Elfride "philosophically" (177; ch. 20). As a budding Angel Clare, Knight blocks his own way to discovery of Elfride's female identity. Hanging from a cliff, he computes. Rescued by a young woman who has abandoned modesty and put "every nerve of her will in entire subjection to her feeling," he reinforces his own resistance. Though she stands before him nearly naked, "Knight's peculiarity of nature was such that it would not allow him to take advantage of the unguarded and passionate avowal she had tacitly made" (206; ch. 22). Stephen might have been too embarrassed to act in this situation, but Knight is too wooden. He needs a love potion. There is, of course, none within reach. He will not allow the spirit of romance into his frigidly rational, mechanistic life. Where

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Elfride is concerned, he merely exalts in his "mental ability to reason her down" (317; ch. 35).

Extending the cycle of parallels linking Knight and Tristan there is the pattern of their travels. Having gone to Ireland, where Knight falls in love with Elfride's image, at the next stage of courtship he goes to Brittany where Tristan also fled. But unlike Tristan he does not encounter an alternative Isolde of the White Hands – because he has already met her as the demur and domestic self of Elfride. Moreover, once Knight returns to England, Hardy's portrait of Elfride as a late reiteration of Queen Isolde seems to reach a dead end. She is, melodramatically, discovered to have married Lord Luxellian, a courtly man who is plucked from the early chapters with little regard, it appears, for the novel's aesthetic or moral coherence. Luxellian has barely made an impression on the narrative scheme Hardy has constructed. We can almost hear, at this juncture, Lyon Phelps's howl. But this is where Matthew Arnold's famously unique account of *Tristram and Iseult*, certainly the best known re-telling of the romance available to the young Hardy, takes a decisive place in the coil of romance narratives that nurture Hardy's novel. Arnold, who drew on few sources and thus had a freer hand with the basic narrative, completely re-oriented the plot and emotional dynamic of the romance by making Isolde of Brittany the main character. Since his version begins with the death of the sensual Isolde of Cornwall, Isolde of Brittany can take center stage in the long, concluding section of the poem that is wholly devoted to her. She has been ravaged by the fatal events that killed both her husband and his lover: "in truth, / She seems one dying in a mask of youth" (Arnold III. 74–75). But she has one resource and it is what constitutes Arnold's striking innovation. He makes Isolde of the White Hands a warm, protective, and loving mother of her two children. Her principal delight is to play with them and tell them old romance narratives. She is with them night and day:

> and the wide heaths *where they play*,
> The hollies, and the cliff, and the sea-shore . . .,
> These are to her dear as to them. (III. 103–06, italics added)
>
> Under the glittering hollies Iseult stands,
> Watching her *children play* . . .
> Then Iseult called them to her, and the three
> Clustered under the holly-screen, and she
> Told them an old-world Breton history. (III. 23–37, italics added)
>
> And now she will go home, and softly lay
> Her laughing children in their beds, *and play*
> *A while with them before they sleep* . . . (III. 76–78, italics added)

Arnold's Isolde of Brittany is also endowed with the romance storyteller's gift:

> From Iseult's lips the unbroken story flowed,
> And still the children listened, *their blue eyes*
> Fixed on their mother's face in wide surprise
> Nor did their looks stray once to the sea-side. (III. 45–48; italics added)

The children inherit the color of their eyes from Iseult's "blue eyes" (III. 90).

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Elfride's role as surrogate mother to the Luxellian children, Mary and Kate (the names of Hardy's sisters), is modeled on Arnold's Iseult of Brittany. Nothing in the novel's presentation of Elfride actually prepares the ground for the maternal role she assumes so successfully with the two Luxellian girls (except, perhaps, that Elfride is motherless). The children themselves take the lead in generating their strong bond with Elfride. It is as though they had intuited Elfride's maternal nature of which we are told very little at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, the bond is expressed most often in a highly profiled representation of Elfride's capacity to engage with them as their playmate: "I wish you lived here, Miss Swancourt. . . . Mamma can't play with us so nicely as you do" (38; ch. 5). When Lady Luxellian died suddenly "the little girls were left motherless" but when they come to visit Elfride they call her "little mamma" for "they liked her as well or better than their own mother – that's true" (351; ch. 40). When Elfride marries Luxellian "everybody could see that she would be a most tender mother to them and friend and playmate too" (352–53; ch. 40).

Arnold's poem gave Hardy an account of the Tristan story that prefigures the structure of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* by orchestrating the displacement of a romance-inflected narrative by a domestic-hearth narrative. The fires of passion are banked in Hardy just as they are in Arnold's version, which emphatically pictures the tempestuous Iseult of Ireland as finally being released from the more awkward frenzies of erotic love. The description of her moral transformation can be taken as Arnold's proleptic account of the emotional journey that metamorphoses the Elfride of romance narrative into the Elfride of domestic realism. As La Belle Isolde lies dying, a "sweet expression" comes over her which

> Erased the ravages of time . . .
> So healing is her quiet now;
> So perfectly the lines express
> A tranquil, settled loveliness,
> *Her younger rival's purest grace.* (II. 138–47; italics added)

The lines describe La Belle Isolde acquiring her younger rival's aspect and visage just as la belle Elfride will ultimately incarnate the morally sensitive and domestic self of the Elfride who finally marries Lord Luxellian.

The passionate and imaginative side of Elfride struggles throughout the novel to survive the social determinations and constraining scripts that persistently re-write who she is. She is always being presented with choices that, each in its own way, deprive her of herself. She tried, miserably, to inhabit the role of a femme fatale; she tried, more successfully, to live by her passions and imagination. When she finally marries Luxellian she takes the least controlling, most responsible lover in her life and the one who comes closest to a true representation of the noble knight. But Luxellian, simultaneously, performs equally well as a novelistic hero who comes at last to offer Elfride the fulfillments characteristic of Victorian realism's inheritance plots. We may not be inclined to applaud the novel's surprising conclusion but we need not howl at its resolution. Hardy, in order to suture the wounds of self-division Elfride has endured, draws on Arnold's transformation of the Tristan and Isolde story into a domestic idyll, though one that still trails the clouds of narrative glory deriving from its origin in medieval romance. To this extent Elfride's conflicted experience is set in instructive contrast to Endelstow's cracked church tower, doomed to be replaced, outrageously, by "the newest style of Gothic art" (291; Dolin xxxi). Elfride, by contrast, is much more gracefully,

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if only briefly, restored to coherent connection with both her Luxellian inheritance and her determination to define her own identity.

III. Precursors, Drafts, and Redactions

HARDY'S ELABORATION OF THE ROMANCE–NARRATIVES that coil about the plot of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* produces an insistent reflexivity in the novel's discourse. The same is true of the pronounced coincidences, repetitions, doublings, and déjà vu experiences that the narrator highlights rather than hides. Poor Jethway was buried on the same day Stephen Smith arrived in Endelstow (73; ch 8). Elfride arrives at Plymouth in the company of Knight at precisely the same hour that she had entered the city two years earlier as "the bride elect of Stephen Smith" (275; ch. 29). Her own history of elopement repeats both her grandmother's and her mother's story. These and many similar instances create a meta-fictional commentary on the status of the novel's fictive nature. To use James Phelan's terms, the commentary foregrounds the novel's patterns, techniques, readerly performance, ethics, and ideology. Poiesis rises everywhere while mimesis is deflected by the haunted quality of Hardy's art, its elevation of "shadowy and spectral anti-realities" (Reilly 65). Hardy addresses this condition in his poem "A Commonplace Day," which describes the ordinary day "turning ghost" once the "beamless black" begins to overtake it at twilight (*CP* 1; 10).

Even in his often crepuscular world Hardy allows, as "A Commonplace Day" attests, for the day's "undervoicings" (34), an irreducible recollection of latent or barely realized possibilities felt and heard at the edge of consciousness. We have been tracing, in various ways, persistent "undervoicings" in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, many of the most poignant of these being the intertexts and textual echoes that both solidify the story's thematic grounds and expand its epistemological horizons. Many commentators have observed that Hardy adapts the perspective of a contingent observer capable of holding multiple perspectives in view, including the options supplied by the embedded intertexts visible in his narrative structures (e.g., Boumelha 252). Quite often the text's "undervoicings" recognize Hardy's reaching for the ineffable, a sense of life that can only be expressed in a language bordering on the poetic and constructed from overlapping, dialogical utterances. Shires suggests that the very function of romance in Hardy is to identify "the loss and desire for something hidden" (143). In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* – and in much of his subsequent writing – Hardy constructs characters, situations, and even cultural epochs as though every text existed as a never quite finished draft of a prior text. Two of the novel's most powerful structural metaphors highlight Hardy's general sense of every text's inevitably sedimentary composition. Knight dangling on the cliff face sees into the revisions and edits that time has formed in the text of nature. When he is not dangling amidst the eons, he lives in rooms at "Bede's Inn" where he writes his dull articles for the *Present*. Here we get the measure of an ironic historiography as the Venerable Bede's weighty chronicle is feebly re-written as Knight's pedestrian journalism.

A Pair of Blue Eyes is filled with comparable, if less sweeping, instances of precursor texts that metamorphose into redacted discourses. Elfride often writes her father's sermons complete with notations – "Keep your voice down" – which he presumably follows when he delivers the sermon as an oral performance (28; ch. 4). We learn that Elfride first wrote her romance as a draft on bits of paper that she kept jumbled in her purse (36; ch. 5). Knight, with his usual fussiness, takes notes on Elfride's character that she succeeds in getting to read before he has time to "Amplify and correct for paper on Artless Arts," a typical piece

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of his journalistic flummery (164; ch. 18). Another piece of his flummery is a misogynist article he has more or less lifted from some casual remarks of Stephen's. "The text of that sermon," he confesses, "was not my own at all" (282; ch. 30). Conversely, Knight learns after meeting Elfride how very odd it was "to look at his theories on the subject of love . . . by the full light of a new experience and see how much more his sentences meant than he had felt them to mean when they were written" (177; ch. 20). The text alters according to the emotions and disposition of the writer or reader. Elfride, like many a puzzled editor, believes an originary state of the text is available in the "concentrated form" of "thoughts in embryo": "Pure rectified spirit, above proof; before it is lowered to be fit for human consumption" (162–63; ch. 18). But her belief in textual purity is cruelly turned against her. She left a letter for Mrs. Jethway imploring the aggrieved woman not to reveal to Knight the ruinous information she possesses. Mrs. Jethway responds by writing a letter to Knight. We are given several false starts – "renounced beginnings" of this letter (303–04; ch. 33), all of them eventually read by Knight. Each draft begins with a different focus – the sorrowing Mrs. Jethway herself, then the betrayed Knight, then the perfidious Elfride. These drafts, all of them relevant, are tossed aside, but Mrs. Jethway had completed her letter to Knight and posted it before her death. In it she enclosed Elfride's letter to her, essentially a confession of her guilt. Though the narrator gives us the full text of Elfride's letter when she leaves it at the cottage, he gives us exactly the same text a few pages later when Knight finds it in the envelope Mrs. Jethway addressed to him (307; ch. 34). Here the gap between the original text and later draft closes completely, but the two texts – the one Elfride writes and the identical one that Knight reads – are discrete documents in spite of their being exact copies. One is a heartfelt plea for understanding; its reiteration is a license to condemn: "Circumstance lent to evil words a ring of pitiless justice echoing from the grave. Knight could not endure their possession. He tore the letter into fragments" (308; ch. 34).

The sequence of alternate drafts and alternate interpretations frames the same questions about identity that we see in the piled up precursor texts and altered genres that, like shadowy secrets, offer us a version of Wordsworthian anamnesis. Experience is linked to a point beyond experience as the present is linked to the ultimately illegible palimpsest of the past; the mind is aware of a loss or a redaction that cannot be fixed precisely. Since self-identity can only approximate "pure rectified spirit," identity itself is always partially eclipsed – though never erased – by a "conjunctive-disjunctive progression" of pending revisions and scrapped possibilities (Hartman 203), an evolution with tangled roots in the deep past and obscure options just around the corner.

We get a dramatic demonstration of what is at stake in Hardy's construction of this predicament in the inner conflicts of all of his characters, but especially in Elfride's determined effort to be seen – even by risking injury (153–55; ch. 18) – and to be heard and read. The whole novel makes prominent the failure of both Stephen Smith, the boy-knight, and his successor, the "Virgin Knight," to see Elfride as an actual person (Ebbatson 22).[17] The unseeing and unknowing of Smith and Knight are apparent in their repeated repressions of Elfride's phenomenal reality. Only her absence rouses Knight (176; ch. 20). And only her image rouses Stephen. They both bury her beneath the conventional identity they have conferred on her. Knight continues to see her as willingly timid and worshipful in his presence: "How proud she was to be seen walking with him, bearing legibly in her eyes the thought that he was the greatest genius in the world" (337; ch. 38). The more modest

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Stephen assimilates Elfride to his "sketches," putatively drawings of sacred figures, but all of them portraits of Elfride. He had "never been weary of outlining Elfride" (332; ch. 38). Beyond his compulsive drawings Stephen does not advance just as Knight does not advance beyond the eidolon of his fantasies. The narrator produces the plot equivalent of their not seeing and not knowing by eliminating Elfride from the final five and half chapters of the novel. Even Stephen and Knight, in the last phase of their impercipience, cannot locate her until they see a coffin-plate and coronet delivered for the coffin they have been following unawares. They stare in disbelief at the solemn engraving which at last informs them, in "quaint Church-text" ("The Inscription," *CP* 18), printed on the page for us to see, that the coffin bears Elfride's remains, and that she had married Lord Luxellian: "They read it, and read it, and read it again" (349; ch. 40). Yet they cannot alter it. The authority of "Church-text" establishes a finalizing frame of reality, the terminus of revisions, allusions, and intertexts.

Elfride, as Wolfreys suggests, sees past the material world (84). She had developed "an inner and private world apart from the visible one about her" (99; ch. 11). Her lively imagination inspired her not only to write romances, but to take chances; "she was markedly one of those who sigh for the unattainable" (189; ch. 20). Her romantic instincts link her (at least at first) both to La Belle Dame sans merci and to La Belle Isolde while, nearer to home, she belongs with the bold women with whom she eventually shares the Luxellian crypt. And yet social, gender, and even discursive pressures remake her into a new Isolde of the White Hands whose self-reduction leaves her bereft of all but the affections of Mary and Kate and the generous feeling of the nobleman she at last marries. Of course, she needs to face her world with greater honesty. Too often she fends off negative experience by lying. Most calamitous is her dishonesty with herself, which unhappily blinds her to the constraining conditions that keep her in her place. Elfride's mind had, alas, "been impregnated with sentiments of her own smallness," especially when it comes to Knight's treatment of her (165; ch. 19). In the chess game of the novel she is accounted queen, but she keeps succumbing to the position of pawn.

She is twice buried. She is interred in the Luxellian crypt, but she is also entombed in a narrative of implacable duplicates, historical doublings and déjà vu experiences that fascinate the narrator. Hardy's plots always hinge on time's ontological tricks, its legerdemain of anticipation, recurrence, prolepsis, mirroring, and revision. Even Elfride's death, not narrated in the novel, is anticipated in her visit to the Luxellian manor house with its moody gallery of her forebears: "the society of Luxellian shades of cadaverous complexion fixed by Holbein, Kneller, and Lely" (37; ch. 5). The pictorial genealogy is itself extended into yet remoter ages by the precursor texts that the novel hangs amidst its pages, adding to the complex of repetitions whose essence is to capture "the past remembered forward as a prophecy" (Vendler 48).

But it must also be said that Hardy's strongest characters never altogether surrender to these tricks. They radiate, as Forest Pyle writes, Hardy's conflicted desire for a glimmering vision or, at least, an underlying coherence. The narrator of Hardy's fiction commonly supplies at the level of discourse what is "lost at the level of story," in effect conducting a work of restoration "in the interest of re-establishing historical continuity, reconnecting past with present" (Pyle 361, 364). This effort accompanies the act of looking into Elfride's eyes, which disclose in their misty and shady blue the knights of romance, the Knights of novels, and both of the Isoldes within her. Her eyes brim with redactions that reflect the wizard's

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work, the discourse of romance, tilted against the presumptive privileges of Victorian social realism.

University of Texas at Austin

NOTES

1. Hereafter, *LW*.
2. Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was originally published in eleven monthly parts (1872–1873) in *Tinsleys' Magazine* and in volume form by Tinsley Brothers in 1873. Hardy revised it often and carefully. A full account of the important editions is given by Manford in his "Note on the Text" prepared for the 2005 Oxford University Press edition.
3. Hereafter, *THPW*.
4. Hereafter, *CP*.
5. The concept of "structures of feeling" was developed by Raymond Williams. I discuss both the concept and the continuing pertinence of Williams as a critic of Hardy's literary works in "Hardy Versus Wessex."
6. For a detailed discussion of how Hardy used the Tristan story and what he borrowed from his likely sources see my "Hardy and the Tristan-Isolde Romance: Contexts and Sources." It is clear that Hardy drew from many versions of the story instead of relying on Malory alone. Both in that essay and here I adopt the modern spelling convention as indicated above, except, of course, where a particular author's spelling is being cited.
7. For examples of productive feminist approaches see Morgan and Thomas.
8. Knight's experience on the cliff face has often been seen as an image of a reader coping with a text; e.g., Harris (26) and Prentiss (65–66).
9. For Hardy's alterations of this title see "Explanatory Notes" (361–62).
10. Furst offers a brief version of this analysis (188–90).
11. On this point Gillian Beer is especially insightful. See pp. 239–47.
12. Again, essentially Frye's view. Jameson rejects Frye's position in *The Political Unconscious* (110–14).
13. See Duncan (6–10).
14. Swinburne's "Prelude" to his *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882) was first published in *Pleasure: A Holiday Book of Prose and Verse* (1871); Tennyson's searingly negative account of the lovers appeared initially in the *Contemporary Review* (Dec. 1871). Both of these poems were caught up in "The Fleshly School of Poetry" debate that also influenced Hardy (see Farrell, "Hardy and the Tristan-Isolde Romance: Contexts and Sources" 92–95).
15. Hardy underscores the chess–courtship tradition by explicit reference to Miranda's game with Ferdinand in *The Tempest* (8; ch. 1).
16. The *Prose Tristan* (Curtis, ed.). This work, dating from the early to mid-thirteenth century, is a large collection of Tristan tales and comprises the first great Arthurian prose romance. It was enormously popular and became the basis of many romance narratives, including Malory's. For how Hardy used the chess game symbolically in the novel, see the essays by Rimmer and Downey.
17. Ebbatson cites a suggestion made by D. H. Lawrence (49–50).

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