# "Terrible Iterations": Reading *Tess* without Consent

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IN the fall of 2017, a year into the current U.S. administration, a month into the #MeToo movement, I reread Adorno's 1962 essay "Commitment," on the creation and consumption of art in an authoritarian world. I reread it at the same time that I became brave enough, and angry enough, to teach *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) for the first time in my fifteen-year career. Adorno says that Sartre's question, "'Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?' is also the question whether any art now has the right to exist" in the wake of atrocities like the Holocaust.[1] Adorno ultimately resolves the question in the affirmative, but only at the end of an essay otherwise dedicated to the difficulties of producing literature that resists a consumerist regime. For Adorno, committed literature (that is, progressive, instrumentalized, messaged) all too often assimilates itself to the brutalities against which it protests, while autonomous literature (that is, art that exists for itself) runs the risk of degenerating into a "fetish . . . an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political" (177). In returning to both *Tess* and Adorno after a longish absence, I wondered whether, in spite of Adorno's overtly modernist leanings, we might nevertheless consider that certain Victorian novels manifest his concept of tensed oscillation between commitment and autonomy. Adorno suggests that certain nonrealist art forms (one of his examples is Picasso's *Guernica*) neither "do" nor attempt to compel others to "do" anything instrumental, and yet such works simultaneously both illuminate and (precisely in their turning away from action) condemn systemic brutalities. We need not entirely agree with Adorno's reading of *Guernica* specifically, nor his fetish-treatment of modernist art broadly, to entertain the idea that—even in their realist projects—certain Victorian novels also "negate empirical reality, [and] by merely existing endlessly reiterat[e systemic] guilt"

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(190). I'll return to this question more directly later in the essay; for now, let it lurk in the corners of my discussion of *Tess*.

## Circumscription

Scholars of Victorian studies have, with renewed urgency, returned to the archive for signs that Victorians saw themselves as global citizens. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* does not at first appear to lend itself to such a project. Wessex-bound as it is, *Tess* is surely about what happens when a life is constricted: by poverty, gender, and geographical space. Tess traverses the same forty-mile radius, from Blackmoor Vale to Trantridge, from Blackmoor to the Valley of the Froom, from Blackmoor to Flintcomb-Ash. A wearying set of miles and yet not far enough, for she is recognized, remembered, catcalled, followed. She disfigures herself to avoid regional memory and persecution, but it does not work. Her former street harasser becomes her boss; her rapist becomes her local preacher. Her in-laws steal her boots. What happens when a life is thus circumscribed?

Paradoxically, the fact that this question has such startling contemporary resonance makes Hardy's novel outward-looking to a historical moment as bleak and pitiless as its own. And if our definition of global literature opens up to understand "global" to include the diachronically deep alongside the synchronically wide, as critics like Wai Chee Dimock and Rebecca Walkowitz have demanded that it do,[2] then we can return to *Tess* with fresh eyes. Thus attuned, we might notice not just how Tess's present fate seems to spring disastrously from the history of her own body—its links to lost families and fallen houses—but also to notice what the novel might encode as its own global future. One could say that #MeToo, and all the tributary questions of guilt and innocence, power and agency feeding it, is the Victorian afterlife of *Tess* itself, and of its entire critical history.[3]

I would go so far as to say that *Tess*'s reception history, together with many of our extant critical editions, tends to recapitulate the subject-object relations the novel goes so far to critique and invites readers to render judgment on Tess. For example, we might think of the novel's rejection by Tillotson, Murray, and Macmillan on the grounds, variously, of "its reference to immoral situations" or of having "rather too much succulence."[4] We might remember the manuscript's bowdlerization by its eventual serial publisher, the *Graphic*, in 1891. Hardy published two excised portions as stories in the *National Observer* and *Fortnightly Review* even as the *Graphic*

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publication proceeded, essentially creating an underground or para-*Tess*. The original manuscript was reinstated in the triple-decker publication by Osgood, McIlvaine, and Co. that same year. This brief but intense publication skirmish gave rise to an all-out critical melee over the following year. The novel's haters called it a "clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust" (439) or, more succinctly, "Cess" (441). Even the novel's admirers, while acknowledging that Tess is (in Angel's words) "more sinned against than sinning," often wonder "why Tess submitted so completely to d'Urberville instead of revolting from him after his act of treachery" (434). Put differently, *Tess* the novel underwent the same interpretive whiplash that Tess the woman faced within the novel's diegetic confines. And far from being resolved in critical discourse over the following century, the critical editions available to an undergraduate reader often reinscribe the "question" of Tess's culpability in her own victimization. Tim Dolan's "History of the Text" in his Penguin Classics critical edition calls what happens to Tess a "rape-seduction." Garrett Stewart's essay in John Paul Riquelme's Bedford critical edition calls her attack "like rape" instead of rape.[5]

One cannot help but—or rather, I felt ethically compelled to—correlate this record above with the grim record of #MeToo and its varied aftermaths. And yet, what impelled me to teach *Tess* was the hope of moving on from this editorial circumscription; the endless rhetorical cycle through Tess's "innocence" or "complicity"; the scholarly hyperfocus on body, gesture, and dress; and what they might mean about her "knowingness" of her impending assault. What impelled me was the hope of asking other questions, like, What if the purpose of this novel is not, in Adorno's words, "to work up atrocities into 'limiting situations' which [the novel] then accepts to the extent that they reveal [human] authenticity" (189)? For instance, Garrett Stewart has asserted that readers become implicated in Tess's objectification and exploitation, rewarded by Hardy for an "imaginative intuition that verges on voyeuristic titillation."[6] Jeff Nunokawa argues that Tess is embedded in a touristic fantasy of rural England and that the "ending of *Tess* prepares us to imagine that the appreciation of a spectacle is the aim to which the text is directed" all along.[7] As central as they are to *Tess* scholarship, works like Nunokawa's and Stewart's presuppose a novel that renders Tess ultimately as an objectified and violated body, a readership that fetishizes Tess's body and its desecrations, an ending that denies and even mocks Tess's interiority as always already doomed attempts at subjectivity.

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But never in my readings of *Tess*—not first as a girl Tess's own age, not now as a mother of a daughter and a teacher of young women—have I wondered what to call the events that befall Tess. Never have I felt Tess to be reduced to a pornographic joke between a male author and male readership. Never have I felt the narrative of Tess's life to be undone by the senselessness of her death. Never, in other words, have I acquiesced to Tess's destruction. And I want to suggest that if we approach the brutalities of the novel thus—unaesthetically, unconsentingly—its historical and formal layering might open to us afresh. We might be able to appreciate the sovereignty of both Tess and *Tess*, what Derrida might have called the "unrepeatable singularity" of the literary subject (and object), while simultaneously recognizing its solidarity (its "iterability") with other global and temporal narratives.[8]

## Voyage

For if *Tess* looks inward—to the forty-mile radius of Wessex that Tess exhaustingly traverses as well as to the endemic issues of poverty and sexual violence that besiege her there—it simultaneously looks outward to empire. The racializing of Hardy's Wessex has been noted by Deborah Hooker and Jeff Nunokawa, who point to the "Ethiopic scorchings" of the Froom valley, the "zebra-striped field" at Flintcomb-Ash, and the touristic gaze upon the "races" and "inhabitants" of the region.[9] Hardy's aestheticized play between natural and cultural worlds has been correlated to Victorian forms of scientific writing, like natural history and ethnography. And of course, if not beginning then at least coalescing with Gillian Beer, critics have documented Darwin's relevance to Hardy.[10] Most of this scholarship has located Hardy's correlation to Darwin through his coordination of human and natural societies and have therefore focused on Hardy's relationship to *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Similarly, most critics describe Hardy's racialized language as a generalized exoticizing of rural England. I would counter that Hardy's ethnographic translation is far more specifically positioned. If, instead of *Origin* or *Descent*, we read *Tess* through *The Voyage of the Beagle* and the ship's early stops in Brazil, we must see that where Darwin bears witness to the slave trade in 1838 is precisely where Clare proposes to buy cheap farmland in 1891, two years after Brazilian abolition.[11]

If, following George Levine,[12] who suggests that Darwin influenced Hardy most through his formal challenges to realism, we infer that some of Hardy's unreal moments include collapsing distinctions of time and

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place between Brazil and Wessex; if we note that the way poor female bodies people Hardy's landscape evokes Darwin's lyrical observations of the land, which always include thinly veiled excoriations of slavery; then we might perceive a more global framework for *Tess*'s tragedies. Without recapitulating the prior scholarship that reveals Darwin as a master of literary form, I will offer a single instance of *Voyage* in which realism is cut through with formal intervention in its own narrative project to produce the same heartrending modulations into regional memory, persecution, and biopolitical violence as *Tess*:

> As the moon rose early, we determined to start the same evening for our sleeping-place at the Lagoa Maricá. As it was growing dark we passed under one of the massive, bare, and steep hills of granite which are so common in this country. This spot is notorious from having been, for a long time, the residence of some runaway slaves, who, by cultivating a little ground near the top, contrived to eke out a subsistence. At length they were discovered, and a party of soldiers being sent, the whole were seized with the exception of one old woman, who, sooner than again be led into slavery, dashed herself to pieces from the summit of the mountain. In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy. We continued riding for some hours. For the few last miles the road was intricate, and it passed through a desert waste of marshes and lagoons. . . . The scene by the dimmed light of the moon was most desolate. . . . [T]he solitary snipe, as it rose, uttered its plaintive cry. The distant and sullen roar of the sea scarcely broke the stillness of the night.[13]

Through what at first reads only as pathetic fallacy, Brazil's landscape becomes layered with the history of human suffering. As Darwin passes by the site of tragedy, the land takes on emotional register (the growing darkness, the massive and bare rock). Although the sentence "We continued riding for some hours" at first conveys a sharp narrative break from the embedded slave narrative, it is actually a signal that Darwin's affective response endures long after passing (the desolate desert waste, the bird's plaintive cry, and the sullen roar of the sea all evoke the subaltern bodies that dwelled miles back in the mountains).

And yet the power of this passage also lies in first-person narrative giving way to third as Darwin and his fellow travelers pass the "[notorious spot]." The narrative is stripped to historical fact. The passive voice evacuates the mechanisms of power: the refugees "were discovered," a party of soldiers "were sent," the people "were seized." The woman's suicidal resistance is then followed by a stunning example of free indirect discourse: "In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble

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love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy." Narrative irony is indicated through the shift from the interpretive potential of "would have been called" to the stark immobility of "is." Darwin's first-person narration picks up immediately after the moment of free indirect discourse, and so does the affective turn, as if to flood out the callousness, the indifference, of the third-person voice. But the very displacement, the very deferral of emotion from human to geomorphic bodies reveals the narrative's utterly insufficient response to the gross violations to which it bears witness. And not only Darwin's narrative but, by extension, the one he received from fellow travelers, and the ones he imagines in that moment of free indirect discourse. Densely layered and formally nuanced as it is, the passage disrupts the travel narrative's conventionally aestheticized descriptions of a landscape and its inhabitants—as picturesque or sublime, familiar or exotic, quaint or queer. In this moment, and in others throughout *Voyage*, Darwin replaces the generally consumptive energies of the travelogue with a wholly different affective register: one that is acutely aware of long histories of power and abuse, generated from a narrative consciousness that perceives its own culpability in such histories.

One might say that the passage is in dialogue with Ruskin's coinage of the pathetic fallacy itself. Attacking the sentimentality of Romantic poetry, Ruskin differentiates between the "ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us" and "false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy."[14] Ruskin concludes that only those who render the material world objectively belong to the "first order" of artists. The "greatest poets do not often admit this kind of falseness," he says; "the temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy is . . . that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them . . . borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion."[15] In the Darwin passage, however, the narrator is neither borne away nor dazzled, but the very reverse: hyperpresent, brutally awakened to the story of the land he traverses. The passage exemplifies Darwin's emerging interest in systems of entanglement, the layering of human and natural timescales, which he would later render more famously in *The Origin of Species* as the tangled bank passage. It is ironic, then, that Ruskin dismisses the ascription of human emotion to external objects as "violent feelings" that signal bad poetry.[16] The violence of the Darwin passage—and, as I argue, of *Tess* as well—lies not in the sentimental heavings of the narrator's breast but in the local, historical record of human hands laid on human bodies. In Darwin's *Beagle*, pathetic fallacy

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forms not as the "weak" stylings of an individual practitioner but as a powerful indictment of the human tendency to stare and do nothing, or to defer and project outward in the face of unbearable tragedies.

If we read Hardy backward through Darwin, we can begin to see the affinities and solidarities that arise within Victorian literatures; through its intersecting locational specificities, and through the formal resonances (like pathetic fallacy) that interrupt the realist project, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* can be seen to bear witness to the legacy of the Brazilian slave trade. Grounded in Paul Gilroy's cross-cultural amplifications in *The Black Atlantic*, the works of Daniel Hack (*Reaping Something New*) and Vanessa Dickerson (*Dark Victorians*), demand that we cast a broader net in our inclusions into the Victorian canon. At the same time, they require that we reassess the readership that traditionally canonical Victorian texts are and were "meant for." In other words, when we discover that Frederick Douglass reprinted *Bleak House* in his *Paper*, or that Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* rewrites *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*, we must also recognize, as Dickerson says, that literature often read as conservative, assimilationist, or consumerist might be received in very different ways—used for entirely other purposes.[17] In the same way, we ought to consider whether a novel like *Tess*, which seems to be only "about" sex and gender or white, working-class identity, can also give other affordances, present other filiations.[18]

It is in this spirit of inquiry that we might synthesize Darwin's formal strategies with a reading of *Tess*. Such a reading will be more highly attuned to the workings of the third-person narrator in that novel and will work toward seeing the intersections of gender and race through that formal analysis. *Tess* affords ample evidence of ironic detachment: not, I would argue, from Tess but from the objectifying gaze of the men who watch her. That narrative distance operates diegetically upon the characters but also extradiegetically upon the (often explicitly male) reader and sometimes upon the narrator himself. Stewart acknowledges this practice but dismisses it as moments where Tess "tries to opt out of the novel's whole program by asserting a nondisjunctive selfhood."[19] But what if we disagree with Stewart's assertion that Tess ends as she begins, nothing more than a "fine and picturesque" figure?[20]

The places where Tess speaks, thinks, or feels back at Alec, at Angel, are also the places where the narration most feelingly interrogates its own objectifying tendencies. Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer's recent work on *Tess* and environment suggests that, rather than an aestheticizing

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touristic gaze serving as the "structuring condition of the novel," it is "liberalism's collapsed fictions of autonomy" that give rise to "unbearably intimate systems of entanglement."[21] Following this logic, we might find that, for every mention of Tess's holmberry lips and inner arm, there are moments that decenter and delegitimize the objectifying gaze, sometimes deflecting it back onto the male beholder, at other times disembodying and objectifying the gaze itself.

We might, for example, recall the Jack Dollop story that Dairyman Crick tells, in which a dairyman who has seduced a milkmaid hides in the butter churn—when the girl's mother comes to confront him—and ruins the butter. The story's purpose is other than it first appears: not a symbolic resonance between the spoiled butter and Tess's body but rather the stark affective distinction between the story's recipients. Who is this story for? "To her companions," the narrator tells us, "the dairyman's story had been rather a humorous narration than otherwise; none of them but herself seemed to see the sorrow of it" (135–36). Readerly affect takes a gothic turn as Tess tells of her assault to Angel on their wedding night. "The fire in the grate looked impish—demoniacally funny, as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it too did not care. . . . All material objects around announced their irresponsibility with terrible iteration." When, a few sentences later, Angel breaks into "horrible laughter," his interpretive reception of Tess's story is correlated with, in some way becomes one of, the inanimate objects in the room: like those objects, he "did not care" (227, 228). As in Darwin's *Beagle* entry, the "terrible iteration" of human emotion bleeding into material objects—and vice versa—amplifies Tess's dehumanization at the hands of her abusers.

Clare is in fact reduced to his delimiting gaze when the narrator moves us from Tess's heartbreaking letter to Clare's arrival in Brazil: "The eyes for which Tess's letter was intended were gazing at this time on a limitless expanse of country from the back of a mule" (339). What connects the two "countries" here—Curitiba and Wessex—are Clare's eyes, the colonizing male gaze itself. For here is the same viewing strategy that opens the novel with the expository sweep over Wessex in chapter 2. Rather than read that chapter, as others have done, as nostalgic exoticizing, I would instead suggest that Angel's sojourn in Brazil teaches us to reread this opening as the narrator's ventriloquizing of the colonizing "on-looker" that becomes reified in Angel Clare: male scopic logic turned to formal device (16). And as those eyes move from landscape to human form, they focalize not only class or labor, and not only

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gender or sexuality, but race and empire too. The word "white" appears fourteen times in this chapter, from the whiteness of the chalk, to the legendary white hart of the vale, to the white gowns of the girls, who later disintegrate into "white company," "white figures," "white shapes" (14, 18). This incantation of whiteness is often read as an index of sexual purity, but this does not explain why Hardy selects the racialized (and epithetic) "Blackmoor Vale" over its variant, "Blakemore Vale." Of the women's dresses, the narrator notes that "no two whites were alike among them." Marking whiteness as a continuum, and emphasizing whiteness in the context of the "debased" working bodies the fabric clothes, tacitly racializes the white peasant bodies of Blackmoor Vale. In reflecting on these dresses, we might think not only of their symbolic color but of their material composition. The cotton that went into British mills was picked, first by enslaved, and then later by abused and underpaid, African Americans. *Tess* therefore forces us to reflect on how "black, female bod[ies] . . . were essential to domestic productions of 'white' Victorian subjectivity"[22] In other words, it can be tempting, as we read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, to think only of *Tess*'s violated body—or, alternatively, only of Tess's *violated body*—but it is precisely this temptation that the novel compels us to resist (in, for example, its continual references to Tess as just one instance of larger types). As Hack notes, the action of Blackmoor Vale "opens up Hardy's provincially anchored story to a more global and interracial horizon."[23] Reading through Brazil back to Blackmoor Vale, we might see that Tess, like the fugitives near Lagoa Maricá, belongs to a long, layered history, not just of bodily violation but of racialized, global processes of recovery, endurance, and survivorship.

## Commitment II

As I reread "Commitment," two phrases in particular seem uncannily to speak about *Tess*: "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (188); and "works of art, including literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life" (192). *Tess* the book, like the character for which it is named, simultaneously resists objectification and meets it head-on, the narrative pointing inexorably to its own violations. As Tess faces Angel and "confesses" on her honeymoon, it is not her record of sexual assault but her "ancestral mansion" that makes "a spot like a paint-mark set upon her" calling us back to the D'Urberville mansion at Trantridge and impelling us forward to the "desirable

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Mansion to be Let Furnished" that Angel and Tess encounter as they flee Alec's murder (227, 387). We might imagine that Hardy invokes the recurrent "mansion" to signify on the novel form itself and the ongoing cycles of tragedy it enables: there will always be a vacant mansion, a novelistic space, for a heroine to be abused in. The novel itself, in other words, is a "terrible iteration." Indeed, Tess herself gives voice to the perils of literary representation: "[W]hat's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part" (126). Yet the novel also holds its own histories of survivorship from trauma. Everywhere in *Tess* we find the language of recuperation and reconstruction: "The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone"; "some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpected youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and bringing with it hope"; the "years after the return from Trantridge [are] silent, reconstructive years for Tess Durbeyfield" (99, 100, 100). These and countless other examples point to what Hensley and Steer call the "resilience, persistence, and oppositional ongoingness" of Tess herself as well as the outward connections she evokes.[24]

Perhaps this is why Tess is arrested, one might say *apprehended*, at Stonehenge. Here Tess lies sleeping atop the lithic structures that lie atop five hundred years of human ashes. Her movement from unreal Wessex to real Wiltshire evokes other kinds of border crossings too: this is as close as Tess's body can get to Brazil. While Tess fears finding "somebody just like me" in a book, she also longs to "learn why . . . the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike" (126). *Tess* offers images of resistance, moments when Victorian bodies and minds resist their own assimilation or destruction, often paradoxically by recognizing the cultural materials that live on within them. In doing so, these characters recognize not their uniqueness but their unoriginality. They are, in some sense, copies: holdovers from a past they themselves often only obliquely understand. And yet this past affords a different kind of community, convening those who pledge allegiance to suffering that finds a voice, to the creation of a just life. A community, not necessarily harmonious or heterogeneous, but central to any kind of human belonging that matters. At Stonehenge, Tess says to Angel, "[N]ow I am at home" (393). But a novel like *Tess* also suggests that literature produces its own diaspora, a network of linkages interleaved with other scatterings. When Tess "stood up, shook herself, and went forward" (396), she marks her own last moments, her final passage, before she is transferred onward and outward.

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## Notes

1. Adorno, "Commitment," 188. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," 1061; Walkowitz, "Unimaginable Largeness," 226.
3. Erin Spampinato's work is of interest here. In it, she argues that representations of rape and sexual violence have played an unrecognized role in the history of the novel but also have substantively shaped our contemporary understanding and rhetoric of sexual violence, particularly within the academy. She calls this "adjudicative reading: the literary critical tendency to attempt to determine whether a fictional rape really happened in the world of the novel."
4. Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Dolan, xlviii; Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Maier, 11. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references are to Dolan's edition and are noted parenthetically in the text.
5. Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Dolan, liv–lv; Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Riquelme, 540.
6. Stewart, "'Driven Well Home to the Reader's Heart,'" 537.
7. Nunokawa, "Tess, Tourism," 80.
8. Derrida, "Shibboleth," 389–90.
9. Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Dolan, 149, 316.
10. Much of that critical archive moves in one of two directions. The first is that Darwin becomes the catalyst for Hardy's pessimism, for his themes of degeneration and cosmic indifference (see, for instance, Glendening, *Evolutionary Imagination*, or Mallett, "Hardy, Darwin, and the *Origin of Species*"). The second is that Darwin informs Hardy's alignment of the human race (especially women and the rural poor) with the natural landscape (see Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; Levine, "Hardy and Darwin"; and Richardson, "Hardy and the Place of Culture").
11. Lemos, "Angel Clare in Curitiba," 326–27; Page, "Hardy and Brazil," 319–20.
12. In "Hardy and Darwin," George Levine operationalizes Jane Bennett's affect theory of the enchantment of the everyday to describe the Hardy-Darwin connection.
13. Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 58–59.
14. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 158.
15. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 162.
16. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 159.

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17. Dickerson, *Dark Victorians*, 5–11.
18. For instance, Daniel Hack suggests that Charles Chesnutt rereads *Tess* in precisely this way (*Reaping Something New*, 124–27).
19. Stewart, "'Driven Well Home to the Reader's Heart,'" 543.
20. Hardy, *Tess*, ed. Dolan, 16.
21. Hensley and Steer, *Ecological Form*, 7, 8.
22. Hooker, "The Woman in the Race," n.3.
23. Hack, *Reaping Something New*, 126.
24. Hensley and Steer, *Ecological Form*, 12.

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