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## Thomas Hardy's impulse: context and the counterfactual imagination

Jacob Jewusiak

School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, Newcastle University,  
Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

### ABSTRACT

Focusing on the impulsive act, this essay analyzes the relationship between the temporality of decision making and the determination of social context in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), *The Woodlanders* (1887), and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). While critics often note the entrapment of Hardy's characters in contexts such as social class and gender, this article contends that the impulsive act can only be explained contextually after it has already occurred. The irreducibility of the impulsive act to a rational explanation (social or natural determinism, historical necessity) gives rise to a counterfactual imagination that feeds off the contingency of a decision that might have been made differently or not at all. The power of these counterfactuals attests to a shift in the centre of agency away from the urgency of decision making to the more reflective, imaginative rewriting of a past that could have been. By doing so, Hardy's characters exhibit the most agency when they act like authors, viewing themselves as fictional characters that can be written or rewritten.

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When Angel Clare asks Tess to be his wife, he carefully words his proposal so 'that she might not think he had yielded to an impulse of which his head would disapprove'.<sup>1</sup> Opposing 'impulse' and 'head,' Angel's proposal takes a rational form that conceals the turbulent affects that gave rise to it: the turn to reason, he believes, provides a more persuasive ground than the shifting currents of impulsivity. Though repressed, affect enables Angel's proposal by allowing him to ignore the contextual obstacles – such as social class and heredity – that would prevent the marriage of a middle-class farmer and milkmaid. Occurring after the impulsive decision, rationalisation poses as having ontological priority – replacing the contingency of what might-have-been with the assurance of a singular choice. Focusing on the impulsive act, this essay analyzes the relationship between the temporality of decision

**CONTACT** Jacob Jewusiak  [jacobjewusiak@gmail.com](mailto:jacobjewusiak@gmail.com)

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making and the determination of social context in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), *The Woodlanders* (1887), and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). While critics often note the entrapment of Hardy's characters in contexts such as social class and gender, I argue that the impulsive act – like Angel's above – can only be explained contextually after it has already occurred. The irreducibility of the impulsive act to a rational explanation gives rise to a counterfactual imagination empowered by the contingency of a decision that might have been made differently (or not at all). These counterfactuals attest to a shift in the centre of agency away from the urgency of decision making to the more reflective rewriting of a past that *could* have been. By doing so, Hardy's characters exhibit the most agency when they act like authors, viewing themselves as fictional characters that can be written or rewritten.

Critics provide many accounts of agency in Hardy's work. Michael Valdez Moses, Deana Kreisel, and Andrew Radford show how tradition persists in shaping the present contexts of decision making for Hardy's characters.<sup>2</sup> Kaja Silverman and William Cohen focus on how biology and the natural world determine the limits of agency.<sup>3</sup> Though Hardy seems to undermine individual choice in relation to overwhelming external forces, he provides a more dynamic model of agency grounded in the relation between counterfactual contexts and the temporality of decision making. Impulsive behaviour serves as a hinge where his characters confront the indeterminacy between choice and context. Compressing the decision-making interval to a span of imperceptible duration, an impulse happens but can only be registered after its occurrence. Kay Young observes that Hardy's novels make 'impulse the primary mental state of its characters and its effects a primary motivating force of plot'.<sup>4</sup> Analysing the privilege of feeling over thought in *Jude the Obscure*, Young suggests that the novel makes mood the individual's way of dealing with the reality of a cruel world. While Young identifies the importance of impulsive action in Hardy's work, she does not examine how impulsivity temporarily lifts characters out of the contexts that determine behaviour. The impulsive interval enables Hardy's characters to treat themselves as characters – to give them the autonomy of an author over their fictional creation.

According to the affect theorist Brian Massumi, an impulse 'happens too quickly for it to have happened': it overrides contextual specificity and is irreducible to the determinism of biology or tradition.<sup>5</sup> As such, impulsive actions posit counterfactual contexts as the measure of one's agency, destabilising the ontological priority of the actual over the virtual. Anne-Lise François's theorisation of 'uncounted experience' provides a powerful model for thinking outside of the sequential logic that informs many notions of agency (from context to decision to consequence). François argues for an agential calculus that attends to 'the imaginative possibilities revelation may either open or eclipse'.<sup>6</sup> While Hardy's novels foreclose future possibilities, the

counterfactual imagination allows his characters to negotiate contextual differences such as social class and gender in a fictional past rather than the present moment. The counterfactual agency of Hardy's characters reflects the agency of the novelist himself, whose fictional narratives default to the past-tense imagination of what could have occurred in the past, but did not.

Unlike deliberate action, the contingency of the impulsive act nourishes a powerful counterfactual ache. A lack of cause or convincing reason why one state of affairs prevails over another inspires the feeling that *things really could be different*.<sup>7</sup> Charged with affect, the counterfactual takes on flesh and bleeds into the actual, no longer in the form of a conditional but as an existential fact: what did not happen happens in a different way. Acknowledging the reality of counterfactual contexts forms one of the most difficult and deeply ethical acts in Hardy's novels. Keenly aware of the injustices arising from the maldistribution of resources and the socioeconomic prejudice of English culture, Hardy also explores the possibility of loving-kindness to arise in situations where social contexts such as gender, class, and heredity would shut it down. Affect forms the fault line at the heart of Hardy's determinism where the prism of counterfactuality multiplies and enriches the givenness of context. As I show in the next section, Hardy's novels *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Woodlanders* foreground impulsivity to complicate the relation between deterministic causality and social context. While this relation remains central to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, it includes a counterfactual element that places virtual contexts on the same moral plane as actual ones. Exceeding the contexts of decision making, Thomas Hardy's impulse challenges the limits of agency by connecting those limits to novel writing itself.

### Impulsive contexts

For Hardy, impulsive actions cut across the temporal gaps between past, present, and future.<sup>8</sup> As he writes in his autobiography, he 'consider[s] a social system based on individual spontaneity to promise better for happiness than a curbed and uniform one under which all temperaments are bound to shape themselves to a single pattern of living'.<sup>9</sup> Action based on moral principle contributes to a safe existence, but undermines what is unpredictable, dangerous, and enjoyable about human experience. In his notes, Hardy makes plans to '[w]rite a history of human automatism, or impulsion – viz., an account of human action in spite of human knowledge, showing how very far conduct lags behind the knowledge that should really guide it'.<sup>10</sup> Both spontaneous and untimely, the impulsive act is defined by the moment it occurs. This moment, however, cannot be understood as part of a temporal sequence, since the conditions that motivate an impulse appear only in the aftermath of rationalising self-reflection. The word impulse, Hardy writes, suggests 'a driving power' and 'a spasmodic movement'.<sup>11</sup> It

is a momentary reprieve from temporal causality – a synchronic flash that disrupts the linear sequence of past to present to future.

To circumvent the responsibility of deciding, Hardy's characters often resolve ethical dilemmas impulsively, which offers them partial relief from the contexts that determine their actions. While Hardy's characters often appear passive in the face of powerful forces such as evolution, heredity, and modernisation, the impulsive act's missing interval of deliberation tests the limits of context and personal agency. The impulsive act mitigates moral responsibility not by the subordinating agency to impersonal forces, but through the bewildering rush of affect arising from highly charged situations. In Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, for example, stimulating events often provoke impulsive behaviour that ignores contextual codes such as class or birth. In this novel, the young Elfride Swancourt falls in love with the equally immature architect, Stephen Smith, despite her father's objection to Stephen's humble background. When Stephen travels to India to make his fortune, Elfride shifts her affections to Stephen's friend, the worldly and yet sexually immature man of letters, Henry Knight. Unable to come to terms with the fact that Elfride was romantically involved with someone before himself, Knight breaks off the engagement. The novel ends when Elfride marries a nearby lord for the sake of her father's vanity, dying shortly afterward.

Despite the discrepancy in social class between Elfride and Stephen, acting impulsively allows both characters to transgress the restrictions placed on their relationship. Described as an 'impulsive inconsequent girl', Elfride overcomes her awkward encounters with Stephen through a series of interjections: "Don't you tell papa, will you, Mr. Smith, if I tell you something?" she said with a sudden impulse to make a confidence'.<sup>12</sup> As the two characters become increasingly intimate, Elfride's lack of reserve inspires a reciprocal overflow of feeling on the part of Stephen: 'Stephen flushed hot with impulse ... "We will be wife and husband before we part for long!"'.<sup>13</sup> Hardy replaces what we might expect Stephen to flush hot with – passion, love, desire – with something that is only ambiguously a feeling, and more often understood as a catalyst for the action or expression of an emotion: impulse.

To *feel* impulsive is to be in a state of excitement or sensitivity where one's normal procedures for action have been suspended, adhering instead to the ebb and flow of stimuli:

Elfride's emotion was cumulative, and after a while would assert itself on a sudden. A slight touch was enough to set it free – a poem, a sunset, a cunningly contrived chord of music, a vague imagining, being the usual accidents of its exhibition.<sup>14</sup>

A poem, a sunset, a chord, or mere imagining – the spur toward impulsive action is interchangeable. Unlike emotions such as love or passion, where

the object of the emotion takes central importance, for impulse the provocation matters more than the 'who' or 'what' doing the provoking. While an impulsive action might be traced back to a poem or a sunset, it could just as easily have been something else. Thus, the resulting action is not rationally bound up with its immediate cause so much as tied to the affective force it produces in the individual. Impulsive action arises from the intensity but not the content of a context – it gives rise to an action that disrupts the causal genealogy that organises everyday behaviour.

Stephen and Elfride overcome the obstacle of class and birth by the intensity of the stimuli that affect them, freeing them – briefly – from contextual entrapment.<sup>15</sup> Mismatched as to social station and explicitly forbidden from romantic attachment by Elfride's father, the couple must sidestep a double imperative: the demands of social norms and filial duty. When the two lovers make plans to elope, impulse provides a means of ignoring these duties: 'All she cared to recognise was a dreamy fancy that to-day's rash action was not her own. She was disabled by her moods, and it seemed indispensable to adhere to the programme'.<sup>16</sup> Hardy's language registers the trace of moral agency inherent in the outcome of the impulsive decision: Elfride makes a choice to bracket out the awareness of everything except the impulsive act itself, which provides a dissociative relief from the consequences of her actions. Impulse tends to scramble the intelligibility of moral causality:

So strangely involved are motives that, more than by her promise to Stephen, more even than by her love, she was forced on by a sense of necessity of keeping faith with herself, as promised in the inane vow of ten minutes ago.<sup>17</sup>

What seems like a betrayal of class hierarchy, decorum, and parental authority in the name of love is in fact a commitment to acting impulsively, further insulating Elfride from responsibility for her actions.

Or, so it seems. And this semblance enables the romance between Elfride and Stephen to reach the crisis of their failed elopement. As a means of escaping the disabling context of one's own situation, impulse can never be more than an aspiration: a calculated attempt to overcome the obstacles that thwart one's will by imaginatively suspending the will altogether. In the love story between Henry Knight and Elfride, references to impulse dominate the couple's early romantic encounters. Already betrothed to Stephen, Elfride cannot act on her deepening attachment to Knight. Yet after she rescues Knight from a near death experience, the two were '[m]oved by an impulse neither could resist': 'it was impossible for two persons to go nearer to a kiss than went Knight and Elfride during those minutes of impulsive embrace'.<sup>18</sup> Impulsive behaviour once again overcomes a contextual obstacle, though here it is not the prohibition of class or heredity but Elfride's own promise to Stephen. The process of overcoming her past promise takes the form of the agency annihilating impulse: 'She dismissed the sense of sin in

her past actions, and was automatic in the intoxication of the moment' and later 'I did not meditate any such thing ... It only happened so – quite of itself'.<sup>19</sup> Impulse covers its tracks by concealing the vectors of desire that imply premeditation.

Like *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Hardy's *The Woodlanders* posits impulse as a means of wish-fulfilment; however, the later novel greatly complicates the ethical dimension of decision making. *The Woodlanders* focuses on a woman who serves as the object of desire for two men. Grace Melbury, the daughter of a successful timber merchant, is educated far beyond the ordinary dweller of Little Hintock, which creates a gap between Grace and her intended, the woodsman Giles Winterborne. Grace eventually marries the gentleman doctor and philanderer Edgar Fitzpiers. Fitzpiers, however, strikes up an affair with the widow Felice Charmond, while Grace revives her relationship to her old lover. When both Winterborne and Charmond die, the novel concludes with the dubious reconciliation of Grace and Fitzpiers.

In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy makes the desires of his characters more amorphous and uncertain. For example, Fitzpiers's impulsive decision to marry Grace Melbury short-circuits his desire to rise in the social hierarchy:<sup>20</sup> 'Over and above the genuine emotion which she raised in his heart there hung the sense that he was casting a die by impulse which he might not have thrown by judgment'.<sup>21</sup> His impulsive proposal to Grace reflects his last minute abandonment of a practice in Budmouth for the sake of an affair with Mrs. Charmond: 'Why had he carried out this impulse – taken such wild trouble to effect a probable injury to his own and his young wife's prospects? His motive was fantastic, glowing, shapeless as the fiery scenery about the western sky'.<sup>22</sup> Where in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* impulse fulfils forbidden desires, *The Woodlanders* complicates the motives that inspire impulsive behaviour. Fitzpiers's decision doesn't make sense: '[t]here was every temporal reason for leaving', he muses, but 'could he find it in his heart ... to go away? No'.<sup>23</sup> While sexual desire provides cause enough for Fitzpiers's affair, we should take Hardy's insistence on the motivelessness of the act seriously. Can the motive for an impulse be rationalised and pieced together from its consequences, or does it remain an enigma of its momentary and spontaneous occurrence, a 'fantastic, glowing, shapeless' thing?

Hardy undermines the attempt to reconstruct the motive of an impulse in retrospect. Recovering from a severe illness, Winterborne allows Grace to sleep in his house during a storm so she can hide from her husband. He rests in a leaky shed and becomes sicker, eventually dying in the arms of his old lover. When Grace observes his emaciated body, 'she firmly believed he was dying. Unable to withstand her impulse she knelt down beside him, kissed his hands, and his face, and his hair, moaning in a low voice, "how could I – how could I!"'.<sup>24</sup> In the face of Winterborne's imminent death,

she impulsively puts aside the strictures of propriety. Ostensibly referring to her request for shelter, Grace's exclamation – 'how could I – how could I!' – registers her sense of responsibility for Winterborne's fatal attachment to herself. The juxtaposition of her exclamation with her impulsive action gestures to the wider implications of impulse, as her decision to leave her husband without a definite plan shifts the responsibility for her actions to someone else. In *The Woodlanders*'s original publication in *Macmillan's Magazine* Grace's exclamation is phrased as a double question: 'How could I? How could I?'<sup>25</sup> While the rhetorical effect of this phrasing suggests Grace's crushing realisation of her guilt, it retains a trace of disbelief in her own culpability that is verified by its repetition: 'How could I?'

Hardy insists that the consequences of impulsive actions cannot be traced back to the moral agent, but rather attributed to the impersonal operation of impulse itself. When Mrs. Charmond begins her affair with Fitzpiers, '[s]he had never so clearly perceived till now that her soul was being slowly invaded by a delirium which had brought about all this; that she was losing judgment and dignity under it, becoming an animated impulse only, a passion incarnate'.<sup>26</sup> Charmond's affair does not begin with an impulsive act (it is in fact carefully calculated); rather, the affair itself propels her into a state of increasing impulsiveness. She begins to lose touch with basic human qualities, becoming 'an animated impulse' and 'a passion incarnate'. Such abstract states of being take her beyond moral considerations: how is it possible to assign blame if one's existence is predicated on the absence of time to deliberate? The focus falls not on the singular impulsive act but on the extended impulsive condition. In this state the question of motive becomes more vexed: while impulsivity could provide the means for Mrs. Charmond to continue the affair, it could just as easily be the means of ending it.

The impulsive condition obscures the causal circuitry of means and end. Is acting impulsively an instinct or habit? Or is it a form of wish fulfilment that represses one's agency? Caroline Sumpter argues that Hardy draws on evolutionary discourse as a means of relating instinct, impulse, and habit to the sympathetic sense, resulting in 'a biological basis for ethical action'.<sup>27</sup> However, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Woodlanders* suggest that alongside the impulse as an instinctual reaction is the impulse oriented toward future desires. Impulsivity overdetermines motive through a bewildering amplitude of feeling. Right and wrong still carry a significant moral charge in Hardy's work, but alongside a sense of moral rationality exist actions that are cut out of the causal fabric that allows the reader to assign guilt or blame.<sup>28</sup> To weigh these impulsive actions requires a calculus where the language of morality gives way to an affective lexicon of intensity and timing, force and momentum, resistance and inertia.



## Sins of inadvertence and the counterfactual imagination

Critics tend to fall on one side or the other when it comes to the question of Tess's agency. For example, Gillian Beer argues for Tess's passivity by noting her character's affinity with the natural world.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Elisha Cohn claims that Hardy's novel 'ultimately endorses a concept of agency' by showing how Tess's character wavers between the discourse of the creature and the Deleuzian one of becoming-animal.<sup>30</sup> The discussion of impulsive behaviour, however, complicates the concept of agency even further by blurring the distinction between activity and passivity on the part of the individual. Instead of choosing between activity and passivity, *Tess* testifies to the difficulty of distinguishing between the two conditions. By doing so, Hardy orients the reader's attention away from contextual questions having to do with motive and moral responsibility to formal considerations such as timing and affective intensity. Though *Tess*'s narrative seems to shut down free will in favour of deterministic forces, the novel privileges the aspiration of characters to detach themselves from the oppressive context in which they find themselves. As the repentant Angel muses, 'the beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements but in its aims and impulses'.<sup>31</sup> This often unsuccessful aspiration occurs in response to an overwhelming rush of emotion and desire that holds one's possibilities in suspense. During this transformative interval questions of agency become temporally inverted, ironically poised between the openness of the past and the determination of the future.

One of Tess's acute anxieties relates to her sense of being caught in the machinery of fate, a cruelly propulsive force that grinds down individual difference as it moves inexorably forward. As she tells Angel Clare, 'what'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 ... The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings 'll be like thousands' and thousands'.<sup>32</sup> As J. Hillis Miller points out, Hardy's concern was not to show actual repetition – in nature or between individuals – but to draw attention to the '*inclination* for people ... to trace likes in unlikes' and to see 'the old again in the new'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, Tess's lament does not verify the inescapability of determination and fate, but registers her feeling of helplessness in relation to the powerful coercion of past and future. Instead of emphasizing the necessity of a naturalistic world, the novel underlines the affect that this belief creates in the individual. Tess's recognition of her place within a rigidly defined temporal genealogy – the future repeats the present, which repeats the past – is significant not as it rises to level of a philosophic principle, but

rather in the feelings of confinement and despair that the belief produces in her character.

With Tess, Hardy captures the *feeling* that arises when one confronts coercive individuals like Alec D'Urberville or cosmic forces such as the 'Unfulfilled Intention'.<sup>34</sup> Tess explains her view of the future when she says to Angel,

you seem to see numbers of tomorrows just all in a line, the first of them the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel, as if they said, "I'm coming! Beware of me! Beware of me!"<sup>35</sup>

Her speculative language – 'you seem to see' – puts less emphasis on the verifiability of determination than in its affective consequences, the despair that arises in the face of an ominous future beyond one's control. Tess's thoughts about the future are countered by her reflections on the past. As she takes on her father's duty of driving the cart to market, the past furnishes Tess with the comforting possibility of imaginative revision as she explains what an unblighted planet would look like to her brother Abraham: 'Well, father wouldn't have coughed and creped about as he does, and wouldn't have got too tipsy to go this journey; and mother wouldn't have been always washing, and never getting finished'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when Angel asks Tess why she looks 'woebegone', she replies, 'Just a sense of what might have been with me! My life looks as if it has been wasted for want of chances!'.<sup>37</sup> In a surprising reversal, while the future is foreclosed and fills Tess with dread, the past could have been different.

When Tess imagines 'what might have been with me', she reflects upon the brief history of her son, Sorrow. While the rape of Tess has attracted the attention of critics since the novel's publication, the death of Sorrow preoccupies Tess when Angel courts her at Talbothays. Andrew Miller calls this emphasis on what could have happened in the past the optative, a mode of self-formation that 'understands one's past through an acknowledgement of what one has not done, what one has not been'.<sup>38</sup> Miller links the optative with the figure of the dead child, which

throws us back across the chessboard of our possibilities to the thought that the past might have been different, that we might be different now – not that we might one day live again but that they might not on one day have died. The presence of a child encourages the thought that the future might be different; the presence of a dead child forces the thought that the past could have been different.<sup>39</sup>

Sorrow might not have died, he might not have been conceived: the 'lateral prodigality' of such counterfactuals contrasts with the way Tess understands herself as an individual whose pre-formed future glares menacingly backward.<sup>40</sup> The past holds out the possibility of human agency while the future remains grimly foreclosed. As the narrator summarises Tess's thoughts, the

past can be destroyed in a way that the as-yet unformed future cannot: 'To escape the past and all that appertained thereto was to annihilate it'.<sup>41</sup>

The counterfactual activity in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* inverts the normative sequence of temporal rationality, where the past is history, the present an interval of choice, and the future a horizon of possibility. In this novel, Tess looks upon the future as cruelly determined while the past provides the raw material for a flurry of speculation. One of the central questions of the novel relates to the cognitive work that goes on between the two in the present moment of decision making. As in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Woodlanders*, Tess experiments with the minimum requirements of a decision. Impulse functions as a temporal hinge between decision and indecision, the smallest unit of time that marks the passage between these two states. The alacrity of the transition makes the passage from indecision to decision invisible, its span too short for conscious thought to register.<sup>42</sup> The impulsive decision bypasses the present moment of consciousness and becomes recognisable in the past: its status as a decision only arises as a backformation from events that already transpired. Thus, while the present slips away and the future's openness fills her with a sense of inevitability, Tess's rewriting of the past feeds back (or forward) into shaping the contexts that delimit her agency.

This inversion of Tess's feeling toward the past and future derives from her impulsive reaction to moments of affective intensity in the present. As she wanders home from a market-fair, Tess's fellow-workers criticise her for attracting Alec's sexual interest. When Alec rides up to the group and discovers Tess's ill-treatment, he offers her succour in the form of a quick ride away on his horse:

coming as the invitation did at the particular juncture when fear and indignation at these adversaries could be transformed by a spring of the foot into a triumph over them, she abandoned herself to her impulse, put her toe upon his instep, and leapt into the saddle behind him.<sup>43</sup>

Car Darch's mother anticipates the consequences of Tess's impulsive decision when she quips, 'Out of the frying pan into the fire'.<sup>44</sup> This scene suggests the dilemma between determination and free will: is the context to blame or Tess's poor decision? But Tess's 'large and impulsive nature' troubles this dichotomy.<sup>45</sup> Context matters because it provokes Tess to decide; however, she does not decide to accept Alec's help but to abandon herself to impulse. Her choice is not to choose: an act of resignation that separates Tess's impulsiveness from her conscious thought.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* impulsive actions often play a role in scenes of high moral stakes, where the rigours of conscious deliberation contrast with affective faculties such as sympathy and intuition. When Tess observes a flock of wounded pheasants she euthanizes the birds with 'the impulse of a

soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself.<sup>46</sup> This automatic response precedes moral calculation: her ‘first thought was to put the still-living birds out of their torture’.<sup>47</sup> The rationale comes in hindsight, as she makes a connection between her own suffering and that of the birds. Both are victims of arbitrary and violent social practices, where those who have been wounded are not recuperated but turned into sacrifices for the amusement of those in power. Tess’s impulse is that of a fellow sufferer whose body responds as if by reflex to the imposition of a strong stimulus.

The spur to impulsive action is not always so overt, nor the rationale so distinct. When Tess witnesses Alec’s transformation from a libertine to a religious zealot she reflects on the reasons behind his conversion. The narrator reports in free indirect discourse, seemingly following the trajectory of Tess’s own thoughts: ‘she would admit the ungenerous sentiment no longer. D’Urberville was not the first wicked man who had turned away from his wickedness to save his soul alive’.<sup>48</sup> Her thoughts, however, do not reach the clarity of the narrator’s discourse about them and remain in an amorphous and inarticulate state: ‘Such impressions as these moved her vaguely, and without strict definiteness. As soon as the nerveless pause of her surprise would allow her to stir, her impulse was to pass on out of his sight’.<sup>49</sup> The narrator’s report of Tess’s consciousness does not capture the formlessness of her thoughts. She acts on impulse rather than a definite reason, such as Alec’s wicked appearance or his questionable motives. In her acceptance of Alec’s offer of help, her mercy killing of the wounded pheasants, and her confused recognition of a transformed Alec, Tess lapses into an impulsive state where her decisions only take on the appearance as such because of a rationalising narrative voice that confers moral intelligibility on events.

The slippage between Tess’s impulsive actions and the narrator’s description of them speaks to Hardy’s ambivalence about impulse. While he is impressed by what the impulse enables people to do – temporarily allowing Tess the ability to act without deciding, beyond the limitations of context – he also expresses concern about the consequences of this unhinged behaviour. Hardy resembles Angel Clare, who reflects with morbid fascination upon Tess’s murder of Alec:

By degrees he was inclined to believe that she had faintly attempted, at least, what she said she had done; and his horror at her impulse was mixed with amazement at the strength of her affection for himself, and at the strangeness of its quality, which had apparently extinguished her moral sense altogether.<sup>50</sup>

With equal parts awe and horror, Angel marvels at how the impulse catapults the individual into making a decision. The impulse circumvents the smallest and yet most crucial temporal interval that marks the transition between

indecision and decision, destabilising the normative procedure for determining responsibility for one's actions.

The impulse's scrambling effect on morality reflects Tess's dazed sense of agency and social justice:

Never in her life – she could swear it from the bottom of her soul – had she ever intended to do wrong; yet these hard judgments had come. Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?<sup>51</sup>

Philosophical questions about intention recede to the background as society's judgments come crashing upon her, leaving Tess increasingly disconnected from the consciousness of ethical deliberation. After Tess murders Alec, Angel observes 'that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognise the body before him as hers – allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will'.<sup>52</sup> Kaja Silverman contends that the gaze plays an important role in Tess's formation as a subject: she understands herself as a person who is gazed upon.<sup>53</sup> However, this passage suggests that after Tess murders Alec she ceases to identify herself with the object of the male gaze: 'she spiritually ceased to recognise the body before him as hers.' But instead of gaining agency in return, she lapses into a passive state animated by the swirl of stimuli that surround her ('like a corpse upon the current'). Thrown into contexts that shut down her agency, Tess abandons herself to powerful flows of affect that disconnect her decisions from the specific causes that motivate them.

Between the crushing determination of context and the radical irresponsibility of impulsivity, Hardy identifies an alternative possibility in 'the religion of loving-kindness'.<sup>54</sup> The term loving-kindness appears often in Hardy's novels.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes it refers to acts of kindness that go against the grain of socially prescriptive behaviours. But loving-kindness also suggests an attentiveness that goes beyond ordinary perception. The narrator of *The Woodlanders* reflects:

What people saw of [Grace Melbury] in a cursory view was very little; in truth, mainly something that was not she. The woman herself was a shadowy, conjectural creature ... a shape in the gloom, whose true description could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient and long-continued attentiveness which nothing but watchful loving-kindness ever troubles to give.<sup>56</sup>

The real Grace does not appear all at once, but through a slow process of imaginative conjecture based on the observation of her actions and mannerisms. Without lapsing into fantasy or escapism, loving-kindness holds together the aspects of human experience that disappear when attention is focused only on verifiable causes such as social context.

For Hardy, true loving-kindness is at once a perverse and deeply ethical act: for Tess, the death of Sorrow places her at a counterfactual impasse, where the desire to resurrect her child (what if he had not died?) exists alongside the desire to annihilate him (what if he had not been born?). If the past represents a site of possibility and agency, it also forms an arena of ambiguous morality that pulls the individual between dubious and irreconcilable desires. Loving-kindness holds together multiple possibilities in a fascinating and shocking simultaneity, judging character not only by the actions that one committed, but also by the actions that one did not commit – the history that could have been, but was not. Hardy's poem 'Tess's Lament' distills the novel's counterfactual turn into an anguished cry against the writtenness of her past:

I cannot bear my fate as writ,  
 I'd have my life unbecome;  
 Would turn my memory to a blot,  
 Make every relic of me rot,  
 My doings be as they were not,  
 And what they've brought to me!<sup>57</sup>

Tess imagines herself with an author's agency over her own character, with the ability to rewrite – or blot out – the narrative of her life. The novel's despair does not arise from these imagined negations, but from the characters who continually withhold this counterfactual consideration from the judgment of Tess's life.

## Conclusion

Because of the difficulty determining the motive of an impulsive act – whether it arises from habit, anticipation, or desire – the specific situations in which moral agents find themselves are of the utmost importance (since some aspect of the context provides the stimulus to impulsivity), yet context does not help in formulating questions to which there can be a satisfying answer. The same impulsive act could be provoked by the glint of sunlight on a patch of snow or a kind gesture to someone in need – the motivation for the act is linked merely in terms of sequence and intensity and lacks the epistemological force of causal or rational explanations. Acting impulsively enables Hardy's characters to overcome contextual difficulties such as social class and heredity because there is simply no time to consider them.

Many nineteenth-century novelists code impulse negatively as replacing sympathy with self-interest and rational deliberation with irrational desires. For example, George Eliot's characters grapple with the monumental difficulty of making the right decision in a given set of circumstances. A poorly made decision can lock an individual (like Bulstrode of Eliot's *Middlemarch*) into a 'train of causes' from which there is no escape.<sup>58</sup> One of the

most problematic decisions in Eliot's oeuvre is made by Gwendolen Harleth as she watches her husband drown. Hesitating a moment before attempting to rescue Grandcourt, she later tells Daniel that 'I held my hand, and my heart said, "Die!"'.<sup>59</sup> Daniel rationalises Gwendolen's account of her actions as giving 'the character of decisive action to what had been an inappreciably instantaneous glance of desire'.<sup>60</sup> Gwendolen's impulsive decision – her hesitation to save the life of a man that she hates – draws forth the implications of context. It is precisely because of the impulsivity of her decision that Daniel and Gwendolen immediately begin investigating the past contexts that could have motivated her behaviour. In the universe of George Eliot's novels, George Levine writes, nothing 'is explicable without reference to the time and place in which it occurs or exists'.<sup>61</sup> The more irrational and inexplicable the decision, the more one must rely upon context to explain it.

But in Hardy's novels impulse takes on an ambivalent moral charge as the aspiration to override the disabling contexts that circumscribe one's will. Instead of privileging the carefully planned decision as the epitome of social morality, Hardy consistently turns to impulse as the moment where one's agency is paradoxically most active and disabled: at once outside of the determination of context and yet paralysed by the lack of time to deliberate. This excluded middle between determination and free will flickers during impulse's thin sliver of time and energises Hardy's novels with the pain and surprise of contingency. It is the hap of impulse that draws one into such achingly close proximity to the counterfactual. What could have been slides into a state of affective immediacy that blurs the boundaries between the virtual and the actual: Tess's sorrow takes on flesh, becomes Sorrow.

The counterfactual, then, takes on the weight of an existential fact and forces the analysis of agency to work in reverse: not archeologically to the contexts that enable or disable a decision, but to the horizon of counterfactual contexts that the decision produces. This shift in focus reveals the ethical implication of decisions that hardly seem to warrant the name, where action occurs within the virtual realm of the counterfactual. As Hardy's impulsive characters navigate these counterfactual realms, they treat their own past in fictional rather than historical terms. To be a character in Hardy's novels means recognising one's self as such, attentive to the contingencies immanent in the unfurling of one's own story. And as the readers of Hardy's novels we are urged to multiply each character by his or her shadow selves: to consider a world where Tess does not conceive her child alongside the one where she does, a world where Tess murders Alec D'Urberville alongside one where she does not. The significance of such speculations suggests that agency over fictional worlds – for example, the narrative of one's life in the past – manifests itself in the real world as well, though often in a diminished form. Thus, for Hardy the realisation of something creative, outside of deterministic coercion, involves a complex negotiation between

the past and future. Within his novels this takes the form of impulsive action: by demonstrating that the past could have been different, the impulse opens upon difference in the future. And this serves as a model for Hardy's larger inversion of realism's imperative to represent the world faithfully: for as his characters treat themselves like characters to gain control over their lives, so too the fictional world has priority over the real world it ostensibly represents. The transposition of reality and fiction, Hardy suggests, provides the best means of establishing agency over a purblind world that so often shuts it down.

## Notes

1. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 170.
2. Michael Moses writes in *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture* that Hardy's regionalism is an example of 'the fictional presentation of a premodern historical epoch' (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 30. Kreisel writes in *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* that 'the events of a character's life may change his or her superficial impressions, attitudes, and desires – and change his or her outer integument in accord – but the most ancient layers of sedimentation, the skeletons of early belief and habits, always threaten to resurface' (Toronto: Toronto UP, 2012), p. 207. In *Thomas Hardy and the Survivals of Time*, Radford addresses the past through Hardy's anthropological interest in the 'survival', or 'those primitive or ancient forms of thought and practice, which obdurately resisted the impulse of change and lingered into later culture' (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), p. 22. See also Martin Davies's *A Distant Prospect of Wessex: Archaeology and the Past in the Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011).
3. In 'History, Figuration and Female Subjectivity in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*', Silverman writes that 'the assimilation of figure into background means the abolition not just of hierarchy, but of difference, and hence of identity. Environmental absorption marks her demise as emphatically as the black flag does at the end of the novel' (*NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 18.1 (Autumn 1984), p. 27). Cohen argues that 'By amalgamating subject and object, person and landscape, interior and exterior, however, Hardy works toward larger goals as well: of moving agency away from individuals and showing how human beings have a palpable, categorical connection with the natural world' (*Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2009), p. 107).
4. Kay Young, *Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy* (Columbus: Ohio UP, 2010), p. 127.
5. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), p. 20. The impulsive decision requires the same interpretative approach that Martin Jay attributes to the 'event' where 'contextual explanation, however we construe it, is never sufficient' ('Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Historical Contextualization', *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011), p. 567. For these 'extraordinary happenings' something always spills over, exceeding the limits of the situation in which the



- event was performed: they are ‘best grasped in terms of what they make possible rather than what makes them possible’ (ibid., pp. 567, 566). But where Jay locates the possibility of the event in ‘a future still to come,’ Hardy investigates the possibility of a history that could have been but was not (ibid., p. 568).
6. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), p. 21.
  7. Eve Sedgwick associates linear temporality and causal rationality with the logic of patriarchal genealogy: ‘it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son’ (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), pp. 146–47). In contrast, the ‘reparative impulse’ – which Sedgwick associates with affect – is ‘additive and accretive’ and implies that ‘the future may be different from the present’ and ‘that the past, in turn, could’ve happened differently from the way it actually did’ (ibid., pp. 149, 146).
  8. Many critics have recognised the importance of time in Thomas Hardy’s prose and poetry. J. Hillis Miller identifies the play between ‘distance and desire’ as the central theme running through Hardy’s oeuvre: the poet’s melancholy reflection on past times or the narrator’s retrospective account of the characters’ lives (*Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970), pp. xii–xiii). Gillian Beer extends this notion of temporal distance to an evolutionary scale of ‘diverse time-codes’ that are unable to cohere” (*Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), p. 235). For Andrew Radford, the anachronistic ‘survival’ of tradition into the modernity exemplifies both continuity and discord (p. 28). For these critics, the gaps between past, present, and future is writ large in Hardy’s imagination, emphasizing temporal discontinuities that his fiction imaginatively, though unsuccessfully, struggles to bridge.
  9. Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1985), p. 274.
  10. Ibid., 158.
  11. Ibid., 158.
  12. Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), pp. 99, 28.
  13. Ibid., 93.
  14. Ibid., 169.
  15. The impulsively enabled love story is a recurrent motif in Hardy’s novels. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* the womaniser Sergeant Troy is described as an ‘erratic child of impulse’ as he attempts to seduce Bathsheba Everdene (*Far From the Madding Crowd* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), p. 175); in *Return of the Native*, Damon Wildeve and Clem Yeobright pursue Eustacia Vye, a woman who claims that ‘it is my misfortune to be too sudden in feeling’ (*The Return of the Native* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 291).
  16. Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 104.
  17. Ibid., 104.
  18. Ibid., 206.
  19. Ibid., 237, 295.
  20. Among the many impulsive decisions made by Thomas Hardy’s characters, marriage has the most inconveniently long-lasting consequences. Abandoned by her husband and in need of basic resources, Tess refuses to ask for help from his family based on the ‘flimsy fact’ that ‘a member of that family, in a moment of impulse, [wrote] his name in a church-book beside hers’ (*Tess*,

- 295). In *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, Jocelyn Pearston marries Marcia Bencomb after only two days, a situation that quickly deteriorates: 'A legal marriage it was, but not a true marriage. In the night they heard sardonic voices and laughter in the wind at the ludicrous facility afforded them by events for taking a step in two days which they could not retrace in a lifetime' (*The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 39).
21. Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 146.
  22. *Ibid.*, 177.
  23. *Ibid.*, 176.
  24. *Ibid.*, 282.
  25. *Ibid.*, 392.
  26. *Ibid.*, 211.
  27. Caroline Sumpter, 'On Suffering and Sympathy: *Jude the Obscure*, Evolution, and Ethics', *Victorian Studies*, 53.4 (Summer 2011), p. 679.
  28. In his 1883 review of Hardy's novels, Havelock Ellis noted how the amorality of his characters related to their instinctual (rather than rational) decisions: 'Mr. Hardy's heroines are characterized by a yielding to circumstance that is limited by the play of instinct. They are never quite bad. It seems, indeed, that this quality in them, which shuts them out from any high level of goodness, is precisely that which saves them from ever being very bad. They have an instinctive self-respect, an instinctive purity' (Havelock Ellis, 'Thomas Hardy's Novels', in R. G. Cox. (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 117).
  29. Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 220–41. See also Byron Caminero-Santangelo, 'A Moral Dilemma: Ethics in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*', *English Studies*, 75 (1994), pp. 46–61.
  30. Elisha Cohn, "'No insignificant creature": Thomas Hardy's Ethical Turn', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64.4 (March 2010), p. 508.
  31. Hardy, *Tess*, 340.
  32. *Ibid.*, 126.
  33. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), pp. 12–13.
  34. In *The Woodlanders*: 'Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling' (48).
  35. *Ibid.*, 124.
  36. *Ibid.*, 32.
  37. *Ibid.*, 125–26.
  38. Andrew Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), p. 193.
  39. *Ibid.*, 214.
  40. *Ibid.*, 196. Hilary Dannenberg uses the term 'temporal orchestration' to refer to the way a narrative not only 'switches between past and future worlds but also switches between parallel worlds' (*Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 2008), p. 50).
  41. Hardy, *Tess*, 99.
  42. Mark Hansen draws attention to the way new media can reveal the 'interstitial microstages of affectivity' by slowing down 'the imperceptible in-between of

emotional states' ('The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Spring 2004), pp. 587, 589). However, rendering the process of affectivity visible also makes it disappear: 'in these effectively static images, you simply cannot perceive the incremental series of changes filling the unmarked continuum between discrete emotional states as anything like a continuity' (587).

43. Hardy, *Tess*, 68.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 77.
46. *Ibid.*, 279.
47. *Ibid.*, 279.
48. *Ibid.*, 306.
49. *Ibid.*, 306.
50. *Ibid.*, 385.
51. *Ibid.*, 353.
52. *Ibid.*, 459. Hardy added the phrase after the dash for the 1892 one-volume edition of *Tess*.
53. See Silverman, 'History, Figuration and Female Subjectivity', 7–8.
54. Hardy, *Tess*, 330.
55. Ralph Pite describes loving-kindness as 'an ordeal': 'It threatened the self and did not, despite Christ's promise, bring life in all its fullness. Instead, it was both supremely valuable and somehow against nature' (*Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), p. 474).
56. Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 36.
57. Thomas Hardy, 'Tess's Lament', *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 157.
58. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 564.
59. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 596.
60. *Ibid.*, 597.
61. George Levine, 'Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot,' *PMLA*, 77.3 (June 1962), p. 270.

## Disclosure statement

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