In Chapter 30 of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Tess and Angel are driving back to Talbothays from the railway station where they have just delivered the milk destined for Londoners’ breakfasts. Huddled together in the dark and rain under a piece of sail-cloth, Tess is about to confess her ‘history’ to her lover—the events at Trantridge and their aftermath—when her nerve fails her. On impulse she confesses instead another history, of her family’s descent from the knightly d’Urbervilles to the lowly Durbeyfields: the history of a family ‘all gone to nothing!’ (Hardy 1998b, 188). The heterodox Angel, who has already announced to his bemused father that he is ‘“politically sceptical”’ of ‘“old families”’ but ‘“lyrically, dramatically, and even historically… tenderly attached to them”’ (166), and who has been wondering how to present this ‘instinctively refined’ (181) milkmaid to his parents as Mrs Angel Clare, reacts to her makeshift confession with unexpected encouragement. Tess, however, is less enthusiastic. Hers is only one of ‘“several families among the cottagers of this county of almost equal lustre”’ (9), among them (or at least according to Dairyman Crick) ‘“the Hardys”’ (127). This plain fact draws from Angel a curious remark which Tess, and the novel’s many critics and annotators, allow to pass without comment: ‘“Yes,”’ he says, ‘“it is surprising how many of the present tillers of the soil were once owners of it, and I sometimes wonder that a certain school of politicians don’t make capital of the circumstance; but they don’t seem to know it”’ (188–189). This offhand allusion to a now obscure issue in the politics of the day seems oddly out of place among the ‘anxieties, disappointments, shocks, [and] catastrophes’ (44) of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. But like the hissing train that catches Tess in the light of its engine for a few minutes as the milk cans are being loaded, Angel’s remark may be described as one of those ‘intermittent moments of contact’ the novel makes between the ‘secluded world’ of Wessex and ‘modern life’(186).

What exactly did Hardy mean by Angel’s ‘certain school of politicians’ (not ‘political party’ or ‘school of political thought’)? What were its attitudes
towards land tenure and the agricultural labouring classes? And what does this cryptic observation tell us about Hardy's conception of the relationship between politics and culture in late Victorian England? These are not separate issues: the short-lived political campaign obliquely referred to by Angel was motivated by the same ideological crisis—the collapse of mid-Victorian liberalism—that led to a profound uneasiness with politics by those in the cultural sphere. That uneasiness is felt everywhere in Tess, which is why Angel's remark, smuggled in under its sail-cloth, passes virtually unnoticed. Wessex is an imaginative world where, although 'everything is "in the last analysis" political' (Jameson 1981, 20), almost nothing that explicitly refers to topical political affairs is expected to be admitted. Hardy's novels relate to their own time, but not to the details of their own time: no place is more closely identified with 'the ache of modernism' (Hardy 1998b, 124), but its modernism has nothing to do with the modernization of political culture. Politics—'the play of forces and interests engaged in a conflict over the representation and governance of social existence'—is subordinated to 'the political': 'the site where what it means to be in common is open to definition' (Fynsk 1991, x).

Something of that uneasiness with what is often called 'politics proper' (to distinguish it from 'the political') survives in contemporary literary studies. There was a time when works of literature were deemed too important to be read politically; when, in extreme cases, you might call in a sociological critic 'to supplement, with his own specialist and "surface" reading, those more inward accounts which a critic proper (one whose concern is with the centrally human rather than the contingently social) may provide' (Eagleton 1978, 1). If, on the other hand, you called in a politics specialist or political historian to explain the ins and outs of the House of Commons in Trollope, you were engaging in a harmless if rather uninspired scholarly activity. In the more than twenty years since Fredric Jameson declared that politics was 'the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (1981, 22), however, politics in the narrow sense has almost completely disappeared from literary studies. Like Trollope's political fiction, which fails (so the argument goes) to 'experience social fact with any density or complexity' (Myers 1971, 107) because it 'never questions the social and power structure itself' (106), knowing the voting patterns or party memberships of writers cannot tell you anything about 'how literature and society are actually related' (Eagleton 1978, 3). A political criticism grounded in the politics of the day is doomed—isn't it?—to the crudest kind of 'surface' readings of those relations.

This essay starts from the premise that there is a place in political literary criticism for 'mere politics' (another commonly used expression), not in any positivistic or anecdotal form, but as part of a theoretically informed account of the relationship between the objective determinate conditions governing cultural production (ideologies, structures, or discourses of class,