

Multiple time in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Résumé:

Cet article étudie la vision du temps et de l'histoire dans *Far from the Madding Crowd* de Thomas Hardy. Partant des bouleversements profonds de la période où écrivit Hardy, notamment dus aux découvertes darwiniennes, il montre que le roman juxtapose différents niveaux de lecture, ou différentes échelles d'interprétation du temps. Même si le monde de Weatherbury paraît enclos et protégé, la comparaison avec les romans de « Caractère et d'Environnement » qui suivirent, comme *The Return of the Native*, révèle qu'y pointe déjà le sens de la finitude et de l'impuissance humaines face à un temps cosmique ou géologique à peine mesurable. Cela ne signifie pas pourtant que l'homme n'ait aucune prise sur cet écoulement temporel sans fin. En tant qu'architecte, Hardy avait un sens aigu de la puissance « mémorielle » des monuments, et développa toute une symbolique et une poétique de la trace et de l'inscription. Enfin, au dernier niveau—le plus étroit—, c'est la famille et les notions d'héritage et d'héritage qui réinscrivent cette problématique de la communication trans-générationnelle : aux personnages villageois attachés aux traditions et à une tranquille philosophie de la permanence s'opposent des sensibilités à la fois plus modernes et plus destructrices, comme celle de Troy, personnage qui incarne la précipitation aveugle. Hardy offre ainsi une vision désabusée de l'accélération des destins à l'âge moderne.

Abstract :

This paper surveys the various conceptions of time and history at work in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, arguing that the novel may be read on several time-scales, both distinct yet coexistent. Hardy's novels bear witness to the philosophic upheavals due to the scientific discoveries of the time—notably those of Charles Darwin. Although the world of Weatherbury still appears as reassuringly secluded, a short comparison with the following "Novels of Character and Environment", like *The Return of the Native*, may help perceive in both texts a common sense of human meaninglessness in front of the ageless time of geology or the sublime time of the cosmos. But that does not imply that man is left powerless when faced with time. As an architect, Hardy was eminently aware of the memorial capacity of monuments and of familiar buildings, and he developed a whole poetics of the trace or the moving inscription left on the stone by past generations. Finally, narrowing the investigation down onto the human level, the paper focuses on family history and its inter-generational process of transmission and heredity. Two distinct categories may be opposed here: while the rural folk stick to traditions and thus embody a sense of permanence and continuity, characters like Troy on the contrary represent a modern age of change and blind precipitation. Hardy's novels on the whole show history speeding up towards destruction.

Mots clés :

Architecture, Darwinisme, évolutionnisme, flux, géologie, hérédité, mémoire, histoire naturelle, préservation, période.

Key Words :

Architecture, Darwinism, evolutionism, flux, geology, heredity, memory, natural history, preservation, time-scales.

Could *Far from the Madding Crowd* be read as one of “Darwin’s plots”, to borrow Gillian Beer’s phrase? In her pioneering work *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*, she studied the way in which the new worldview derived from Darwin’s discoveries slowly but surely infiltrated the imagery, and even the structure of novels in the second half of the Victorian period, from George Eliot to Thomas Hardy. The major epistemological shift was one from a static conception of a divinely created world to a universe in constant (and autonomous) mutation. Teleology (the idea of a pre-ordained design, and even finality) was replaced with the vision of beings—animal *and* human alike—struggling to survive against huge random and uncontrollable forces. This led to two major re-assessments, to summarise things. The first one was a radical redefinition of man’s position in the universe: man was no longer the centre of meaning; nor was the universe designed to answer his needs and wishes. On the contrary, the relationship was reversed, and man’s existence was shown to be partly determined by outside conditions. The result was, in Gillian Beer’s words, a tremendous blow “at man’s narcissism” (Beer 13). The second major re-qualification was that of Nature, which was no longer perceived as a benevolent, nurturing “Mother” or a providential force, but rather as a blind conjunction of energies relentlessly pushing towards unforeseen results, and constraining all organisms to transform themselves in order to adapt to a never-endingly changing world.

Hardy claimed that he had read Darwin immediately on the publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, and his work as a whole provides ample evidence of the influence of the naturalist’s findings upon the writer. One of the remarks that recur within his personal notebooks and his *Life* is that “Nothing is permanent but change” (*Life*, 380), a phrase which appears to corroborate Darwin’s vision of a world in constant evolution. However *Far from the Madding Crowd* does not show this influence as clearly as later works like *The Woodlanders*, in which the picture of the fight of animal and vegetal species in the woods of Hintock seems to be almost literally derived from Darwin’s evocations of the natural world (cf. Gadoin *Miranda* 2010). The world of Weatherbury is still, to a certain extent, preserved from this newly-theorised world of strife and competition for survival.

A lot has been said about the pastoral inspiration in *Far from the Madding Crowd*—a pastoral argument which is the very opposite of any Darwinian worldview, insofar as it relies on the regular return of the seasons, in accordance with man’s passions and moods. This element of order appears at first sight in the plot, which faithfully follows natural rhythms: Gabriel Oak loses his flock in the dead of winter, to then come back to a more stable situation as Bathsheba’s shepherd before spring. But his quiet passion for his mistress is nipped in the bud by the sudden irruption onstage of Sergeant Troy. Logically in the context of a pastoral romance, Bathsheba and Troy’s love starts blooming in the springtime and culminates with the harvest supper in the month of August. But this mistaken romance quickly goes sour, alongside with the first savage storms that herald the end of the summer and the advent of autumn. It is in that time of fogs and rains and desolation that Fanny dies, on the 20th of October exactly (this date being inscribed on the tombstone Troy puts up for her) and that Troy is reported to have drowned. Winter thus corresponds to the nadir of Bathsheba’s experience. And the fact that Boldwood should propose and set up costly celebrations in the

wintertime again, the following Christmas, could already warn the reader that something wrong or sad is bound to happen—as will be proved by Troy's spectacular come-back and his shooting by Boldwood.

Read in this way, the plot might appear to confirm the cyclical rhythm of life in the countryside, and man's perfect adhesion to natural rule. But in spite of this all-too obvious pastoral blueprint, one could hardly believe that the story merely means to perpetuate the myth of the eternal return. For it is also at the hands of a cruel and sometimes violently destructive nature that man suffers in the novel. Moreover the happy ending with which Victorian readers were gratified comes at very heavy a price. Much has been lost on the way, from Fanny and Troy's lives, to Boldwood's sanity and freedom, and finally Bathsheba's lightness of heart and daring—if not defiant—attitude in life.

I would like to show that several distinct conceptions of time and history actually work side by side, and sometimes interfere in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Although the general pretext for the plot—in purely literary terms—is a pastoral one, Hardy's vision of the natural world is tinged in reality with his knowledge of the harsh story of evolution and the struggle for survival. It is perhaps his cosmological and wide-scale vision of the universe (that I shall first consider) that best betrays his growing awareness of the larger scheme of things, to which man belongs, but which he can hardly master. This does not mean though that man has no grasp whatever upon the historical process and the unfolding of time; as an architect, Hardy knew that men can *also* leave a trace in history, by building monuments which will remain, and his treatment of architecture in his novels (which I shall envision in a second development) says a lot about his vision of evolution on a more human scale. But then, narrowing my inquiry down to this purely human level, I will show that two or more conceptions seem to be vying with one another: one that sees time as the endless repetition of fixed patterns or conventions—mostly under the shape of traditions and folk-ways: this is the long line of continuity mostly represented by the “rustic” characters. Faced with those unchanging habits is another conception, far closer to the evolutionary interpretation, in which the individual is part and parcel of a world of change and flux, but may fight and use all his resources to assert his own will and resistance against the vast forces of nature. One will have recognised this to be an indirect portrayal of Gabriel Oak, whom we might term a post-darwinian hero by force and circumstance. It is thus an understanding of time and history on a *multiple scale* that best defines *Far from the Madding Crowd* or, to take up Gillian Beer's words, “multiple time”, made up of a stratification of different layers of understanding, that testify to the transitional period Hardy was writing in.

I. Cosmological time

It is certainly not by chance if Hardy, after a short tongue-in-cheek characterisation of Gabriel Oak as a perfect anti-hero on the first page of the book, chose to complete his portrayal by placing the individual within the larger frame of *timeless* history. Norcombe Hill, with which Gabriel is immediately associated, does not belong to human history; it far overrides it. It almost appears as one of the “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation”, to quote the title of Robert Chambers's very controversial work, first published anonymously in 1844, and which partly opened the way for Darwin's interrogations and discoveries. The hill seems to refer us back to the primal stages of the earth, when shapes were as yet hardly defined or fixed. And the narrator's groping words seem to suggest that no correspondence could be

found for it in normal day-to-day experience. It is a mere “shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on the earth”;

It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil—an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down (FFMC 11)

In quite a telling way, the sentence mixes the vocabulary of geology (with such long polysyllabic words as “specimen”, “convexity”, “outline”, “protuberance”) with a grandiose vision of primeval cataclysms, suggesting the early ages of the formation of the earth. The paradox though is that mere “chalk and soil” may resist time and its convulsions better than “granite”—which might be an indirect hint at the idea of haphazard selection in the process of evolution, since different elements show various capacities of resistance to the major earthly commotions. Norcombe Hill thus stands as a symbol of *permanence*, and shows the infinity of time, and the near-eternity of the earth.

But this is a symbol that not all men are aware of, for it also conveys a sense of the *Unknown*, that can hardly be spoken, and is merely whispered, as rendered by the “s” sounds in its evocation as a “mysterious sheet of fathomless shade” (12). So the place is both impressive and daunting, for its dimensions escape or baffle human understanding. Hardy, like his hero Gabriel Oak, seems to have been acutely aware of this boundless universe surrounding man. In his *Life*, he stated his “doctrine” that “beyond the knowable, there must always be an unknown” (*Life*, 400); and he drew a distinction between “the children who grow up in solitary country places” and are thereby made sensitive to the unfathomable mystery of the world, and the children who “grow up in towns”, the reason for the difference, he said, being that “the unknown comes within so short a radius from themselves in comparison with the city-bred” (*Life*, 210-11).

These notions, which are merely brushed upon in *Far from the Madding Crowd* seem to have been fleshed out in Hardy's following “novel of character and environment”, published in 1878, *The Return of the Native*. The first three pages of that novel are dedicated to an almost over-laboured description of Egdon Heath, a desolate tract of land, partly desert and mostly sterile, that forms not only the background but even the tragic stage for the events of the plot. Like Norcombe Hill, Egdon seems to find no limits in either space or time. It has lived long before man appeared and will go on living long after man has been wiped off the stage:

The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, but Egdon remained [...] [its] trifling irregularities [...] remained as the finger-touches of the last geological change (TRN, 11).

One could take up these words in a minor key to say that Norcombe Hill likewise remains impassive and unchanged throughout the protagonists' most agonising moments. The title which Hardy gave to his evocation of Egdon Heath, “A face on which time makes but little impression” (TRN, 8), would also perfectly apply to Norcombe Hill...

Hardy's landscapes thus suggest a different *scale* than the finite measure of human existence. Norcombe Hill and Egdon Heath alike relate directly to the *larger-scale* history of the macrocosm, which does not move through a series of small local transformations, but through major *catastrophes*, from the original creation to the final apocalypse: “its Titanic form

seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis—the final overthrow” (TRN, 9). The evocation of the heath in *The Return of the Native* provides the word which is hinted at but nowhere clearly uttered in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: that of *sublimity*. Hardy's vision of the world, which only starts emerging in *Far from the Madding Crowd* but will come to its full development with his later novels, is that of a timeless, boundless space which so much overpowers man's limited capacities of apprehension that it can only inspire him with an almost awed feeling of the sublime—not the Romantic sublime of course, which is a highly aesthetic concept, but a truly Darwinian type of sublime, impressing man with a sense of his own insignificance within the wider history of the earth, which is never to be forgotten.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* as in *The Return of the Native*, this inability to fully comprehend the surrounding world is rendered by the same metaphor: that of the puzzling “*song*” of the earth, which man can only try and seize out of instinct—not by any logical effort of rationalisation. The sound of the wind in the bushes and trees on Norcombe Hill is likened to the various voices of a choir: “the instinctive act of humankind was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir” (FFMC, 12). What is given here in just one sentence will be taken up and extended over two paragraphs in TR, chapter VI, where the natural sounds of the heath make up a whole orchestra, complete with its “treble, tenor and bass notes” and its “baritones” (TRN, 49-50). So faced with this permanence and grandeur of the world, man is sent back to the burning consciousness of his limited importance in the wide scheme of things. This is perhaps one of the sources of Gabriel Oak's fundamental humility: used as he is to contemplate the dramas of the skies, he can only be persuaded of his own “tiny human frame” when compared with the “majestic speeding” of the earth (FFMC, 12).

Besides its boundlessness, its permanence, its mystery, and its sublimity, the last characteristic of this Darwinian universe lies in its tremendous *energy*—or energies in the plural form, like those which seem to give a voice and a pneumatic force to the song of the wind. Gabriel Oak does perceive the enormous forces at work in the earth's “panoramic glide” around (12) and its motion, or “majestic speeding”. Hardy's personal writings (like his *Life* for instance) often come back to this idea of the universe as a huge “machine” moved by blind, unconscious, unpurposive forces—which man is powerless to master, or even understand. One must grant that Hardy's evocation of the earth's geological or pre-historical history is quite limited in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, being mostly concentrated within the initial two-page description of Norcombe Hill. It will become more and more prominent as the novels go by, to culminate in the climaxing scene of Tess's arrest among the grandiose monoliths of the ancient heathen temple of Stonehenge—again described as “A very Temple of the Winds” [...] older than the centuries, older than the d'Urbervilles”, as Angel Clare explains (*Tess*, 310). But even though this is not as yet explicitly fore-grounded in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it is this obscure sense of the presence of earthly and cosmic forces that will set the tragedy in motion. Indeed the major scenes in which men are seen battling against the natural elements illustrate those tremendous, blind and wild energies of an infinite universe: the fire, the storm and in a certain measure also the torrent of water spat by the gargoyle of the Weatherbury church, as well as the currents that carry Troy away from the shore towards the “Unknown” (248) all represent these uncontrollable forces that dominate man and often turn him into a kind of puppet—a metaphor which is regularly applied to Troy.

This adverse power of nature seems to answer Gillian Beer's idea of a Darwinian universe in which obscure drives may play a part, or even a plot, of their own, independently of—and sometimes against—man's will: "Lyell, and later Darwin, demonstrated in their major narratives of geological and natural history that it was possible to have plot without man—both plot previous to man and plot even regardless of him" (Beer 21). I believe that the most impressive moments in the narration of the *Far from the Madding Crowd* are precisely those when the modern reader gets an inkling at this capacity of natural forces to plot without man, and very often, against man. Only those who, like Gabriel Oak, know how to play alongside with those tremendous impulses, manage *not* to be overruled and defeated by Nature. So although geology cannot really be counted as one of the dominant themes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the understanding of the central part it plays in Hardy's work as a whole goes a very long way to explain the author's vision.

II. Architecture

Hardy's profession as an architect, working on ancient monuments, left him with a sense of the extreme brevity of human history when compared with the aeons of geological time. In a very revealing passage of his *Life*, Hardy presents himself revisiting the site of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey". Yet the conclusion he draws is a typically disillusioned one: "but compare the age of the building [i.e. the Abbey] with that of the marble hills from which it was drawn". And he goes on to note that "this *shortcoming* of architecture by comparison with geology was a consideration that often worried Hardy" (*Life*, 96, my emphasis).

Architecture indeed forms another layer in Hardy's multiple temporal strata. Being made up of stone, architecture seems to stand halfway between the boundless time of geology and the very limited scope of the builders' existence. But it does have a certain permanence though. Contrary to the timeless world of natural elements, it is almost systematically dated by the expert narrator, who shares much of Hardy's own professional knowledge of architecture: Bathsheba's manor house is thus defined as a late sixteenth-century building, "of the early stage of the Classic Renaissance" (59) while the Great Barn is defined as a mediaeval building (113); and the Weatherbury Tower is described in very precise technical terms as "a square erection of fourteenth-century date, having two stone gargoyles on each of the four sides of its parapets" (241). And yet what matters to the eye of the architect (and the lover of history that Hardy was) is not so much the original date of construction, as the principle of *continuity* which maintains the building in full use several centuries after it was first designed. The major quality of the Great Barn, which Hardy almost invests with a sacred feeling, is that it has endured through history and seems to relate, rather than oppose, the present and the past: "This picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which is implied by the contrast of date" (114). So architecture draws a link rather than an opposition between generations, partly erasing, or smoothing over the major landmarks in the history of men. It may be this capacity to link men of different generations across wide divides of time that endows the Barn with an almost "religious" tone, since the very word "religion", derived from the Latin "re-ligare", implies the capacity to relate, or unite.

But the "permanence" of architecture is not to be understood as pure *changelessness* or absolute fixity. On the contrary it is a capacity to evolve through time and adapt to new conditions or functions. The trained eye of the architect-narrator can clearly see that Bathsheba's manor-house is now turned towards the farming activities at the back of the

house instead of proudly presenting its noble façade to potential visitors. What Hardy highly values is the way in which the building has *lived* through the centuries and has endured not only the weather but also the multiple changes imposed by successive generations—a capacity of adaptation which is not so very far removed from what Darwin was studying in living organisms. Even when Hardy speaks of the functional continuity of the Great Barn which, contrary to Bathsheba's house, does not seem to have changed in purpose and use, he starts his sentence with a recall of the wear and tear that is the result of age, and the unavoidable process of erosion that eats away at any stone, be it natural or quarry stone: "Standing before this abraded pile, the eye regarded its present usage, the mind dwelt upon its past history, with a satisfied sense of functional continuity throughout—a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride, at the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up" (113).

One should not mistake the narrator's insistence on the traces left by time on monuments. Far from lamenting these, Hardy *treasured* all the imprints and inscriptions of time and past actions within architecture. Such traces were truly the proof of the *life* of the building. And such mentions as those of the "time-eaten arch-stones" or "the misty chestnut work of the rafters" must be not be taken as negative, but rather as entirely positive within Hardy's understanding of time, which almost sacralizes buildings. I have spoken elsewhere (Gadoin) of the moving evocation of the inside of Bathsheba's house, which retains traces of former generations everywhere, and almost seems to ring with the memories of the departed. Hence the fact that Troys' projects of modernisation of the old house almost appear as sacrilegious, since they propose to erase the sentimental traces of past generations.

The vocabulary that is used in those architectural descriptions tells us even more than this mere idea of continuity or adaptation. It is a strange mixture of words borrowed from the field of geology (like the word "remnant" for instance) and the field of biology—that of the human body notably—interspersed with a few very Darwinian notions here and there, like "adaptation" or "mutation". The Barn thus appears as a "typical remnant of mediævalism [embodying] practices that have suffered no *mutilation* at the hands of time" (113, my emphasis). Hardy's architectures almost appear as living creatures, with their strange shapes and ills, like Bathsheba's house:

the *animated* and contrasting state of the reverse façade, suggested to the imagination that on the adaptation of the building to farming purposes the *vital* principle of the house had turned round inside its *body* to face the other way. Reversals of this kind, strange *deformities*, tremendous *paralyses*, are sometimes seen to be inflicted by trade upon edifices (60, my emphasis)

In the same idea, what makes the gargoyle of the Weatherbury Church particularly frightening is the suggestion that it might very well be a living creature, endowed not only with an awful face, but with near-human feelings and capacities of action: "It was too human to be called like a dragon", and it may "vomit", "laugh" at the surrounding landscape, and finally utter "gurgling and snorting sounds" (241).

But the metaphors of the human body should not mislead us. If architecture in Hardy's novels may appear as living through generations, it belongs to a time-scale that is actually far wider than mere human life. One might say that architecture holds an intermediary position between geological time and human time. While geological time hardly seems to move at all, from the perspective of mere men, architecture appears to succeed in slowing down the whole movement of history, by preserving something of the past that acts as a recall of lost ages, and a basis of stability within men's torments. Some of the images in the descriptions of the major

buildings of the novel even suggest a movement of entropy, through which architecture, though man-made, slowly joins back with the slow rhythms of natural and vegetal life. Bathsheba's manor house for instance is covered with "soft brown mosses [...] and tufts of the houseleek or sengreen, sprouted from the eaves of the low surrounding buildings" (59). But it is the description of the Casterbridge Workhouse which best suggests this progressive "naturalisation" of architecture, and the movement of re-absorption of the man-made within the eternal rhythms of nature. The Union house is first presented as a strictly functional and uninteresting building. But the vegetal realm has progressively appropriated it, and changed the ugly building into a "picturesque" sight:

Originally it had been a mere case to hold people. The shell had been so thin, so devoid of excrescence, and so closely drawn over the accommodation granted, that the grim character of what was beneath showed through it, as a body through a winding-sheet.

Then Nature, as it had offended, lent a hand. Masses of ivy grew up, completely covering the walls, till the place looked like an abbey (207).

The malthouse, which is described as "inwrapped with ivy" (44), is another of those man-made buildings that seem to have been claimed by Nature in the course of time. This process of reintegration within the vegetal world again gives a proof of man's limited powers of assertion over the natural kingdom. Indeed, man's poor command of time and his little-assured grasp on events, forms the next step in this multi-layered understanding of time and history.

III. Man, between continuity and precipitation

Coming to history as seen from the point of view of man, one has to make a difference between two major categories: the representatives of village life, or the "rustic" community, who stand in close contact with the natural world and its slow, or near-eternal rhythms; and the intruders, best represented by Sergeant Troy, who on the opposite, tend to disrupt all age-old customs and elements of continuity between past and present. The "rustics" globally appear as a rather static group: they are often seen gathered around the fire or around a pint of beer, at Warren's malthouse for instance. The old maltster, Smallbury, with his eyes constantly "fixed" upon the fire, forms the very epicentre of this small village group. Interestingly, the man himself has obviously undergone the same process of reintegration within the natural elements of the landscape as the old buildings overgrown by mosses and ivy, which says a lot about the indivisibility of these men and their living world: "his frosty white hair and beard over[grew] his gnarled figure like the grey moss and lichen upon a leafless apple-tree" (45).

With these men, Hardy introduces a theme closely linked with the idea of historical continuity, but which came to play a supreme role in his later novels: that of lineage, or the family line. It is that question of lineage, or genealogy, which subtends the whole of the plot in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, since the family of peasants bearing the name Durbeyfield is discovered to descend from a noble family going as far back as the time of William the Conqueror. Here we might say metaphorically that Hardy is probing into another of Darwin's texts, which is *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871. But the morality of the tale Hardy gives us in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is that there is no recovering ancient privileges and status, and that the movement of history when concerning old aristocratic families, is one of degeneracy rather than of uninterrupted progress. For Darwin's law of evolution, and the organisation of heredity, can follow regressive as well as progressive lines.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* however the question of the family line, or heredity, does not as yet lead to tragedy, because village life does tend to perpetuate ancestral traditions and techniques, such as those very clearly detailed in the novel, in relation with sheep tending in all its aspects: looking after new-born lambs, washing or shearing the sheep, selling and buying flocks etc. There is something of a *ritual* in all the activities described, which seem to have gone on unchanged for centuries. Village life still follows unbroken rhythms, and this is where the pastoral scenario finds its justification. The Smallbury family gives a rather playful illustration of the idea of a stable, unbroken family line: the paterfamilias is so old that he has come to forget his age, but he is succeeded by his son Jacob, whom the narrator calls “a young man about sixty-five” and his grand-son William, whom the narrator affectionately presents as “Billy, a child of forty” (46). And it is later revealed that Liddy, Bathsheba’s servant and confidant, is herself William’s daughter. It seems as though the line could go on and on... All those who live around Smallbury seem to share his pride with his un-reckonable age, with his son enticing: “Shepherd would like to hear the pedigree of yer life, father—wouldn’t you shepherd?” (53). Interestingly, the “pedigree” which those villagers can boast is nothing else than a rather dull uninterrupted line, and has nothing to do with the complex history of Tess’s antique pedigree...

Besides, the old Smallbury acts as the guardian of traditions and the keeper of memories, and also remembers the whole of Gabriel Oak’s family line, with all the representatives of Gabriel’s ascendancy recalled in rigorously repetitive sentences: “Knowed yer grandfather for years and years!”, “Knowed yer grandmother”, “Likewise knowed your father when he was a child” (46). And the fact that Gabriel bears the same Christian name as his father and grandfather only reinforces the linearity of his descent. One understands that the “rustic chorus” should thus represent the forces of tradition and even conservatism, opposing any new technique or idea in the village. They are most reticent in front of Bathsheba’s will to break away from inherited principles and assert herself as a mistress, and are happy to predict the short-lived future of her plan... Through the villagers, the author evidently satirises the immobilism and passivity of rural mentalities.

Yet on the whole, it seems that the narrator is mostly happy to play a part in the transmission of this stable village-life and all its ancestral customs. In the preface to the novel, he insisted on the almost archaeological work he had done in resuscitating the name Wessex from the early chronicles of English history, and he painstakingly details all the elements of local history which appear in the pages of the book and have since then disappeared from the habits of rural life. In the General Preface to the 1912 Wessex edition of his novels Hardy took up that stance as a careful historiographer of the Wessex county, claiming the authenticity of his historical picture: “At the dates represented in the various narrations things were like that in Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive certain customs, just as they are shown doing in these pages” (*Jude*, Penguin ed., 495). It is the voice of this historian- or antiquarian-narrator that rings at times in the novel, notably in the description of the Buck’s Head inn, where manners, he says, “were of the old-established type” (218). The narrator’s stance is actually a distanced one, which allows him to compare past and present manners, for instance when speaking of “travellers” and adding a parenthesis which somehow smacks of modern Darwinian ideas “—for the variety *tourist* had hardly developed into a distinct *species* at this date” (218, the first emphasis is Hardy’s; I emphasise the telling word “species”). The same type of distancing (and critical) parenthesis is added when someone is shown hastily scribbling Fanny Robin’s name on the lid of her coffin, and

the narrator inserts the parenthesis “We believe that they do these things more tenderly now, and provide a plate.” (216). Thus Hardy’s typical antiquarian-narrator presents himself as one of the many links in the long chain of *transmission* of local history; but he does not systematically side with the more backwards and conservative aspects of rural life.

The vision of history, and of one’s inscription within the process of evolution, provides an apt gauge for the positioning of the various characters. Thus Gabriel Oak should not be understood only as one of the villagers stuck within an almost fixist conception of time, blindly and obstinately perpetuating the customs and the laws of the fathers. It is of course one of the common clichés to say that his name, “Oak”, implies the notion of age, wisdom and stability. But although he does belong to the region, and although his family story is well known and repeated, he has moved around a lot and, most of all, has tried to make some progress in life, passing from the condition of a shepherd to that of an independent farmer, before he tragically loses his sheep. The whole of his efforts consequently to this “pastoral tragedy” will aim at re-conquering a position of authority and respect, and he will upbraid Bathsheba in these terms: “Don’t believe I am content to be a nobody. I was made for better things” (151). The reply shows the clear point of departure between Oak and the more inert and stagnant of the villagers. Yet the fact remains that Oak *also* knows how to preserve the long line of continuity with the past. He preciously keeps the old watch which he has inherited from his grandfather (just as Jan Coggan has inherited his), even though the watch is no use at all any more, being unable to tell the time. The image tells us a lot about his spirit of preservation, which is further confirmed at the end of the novel, when he has at last recovered his dignity by working as a bailiff on both the farms of Bathsheba and Boldwood, and nonetheless persists in his old and very humble habits:

Some were beginning to consider Oak a ‘near’ man, for though his condition had thus far improved, he lived in no better style than before, occupying the same cottage, paring his own potatoes, mending his stockings and sometimes even making his bed with is own hands. But as Oak was not only provokingly indifferent to public opinion, but a man who clung persistently to old habits and usages, simply because they were old, there was room for doubt as to his motives (254).

Those considerations naturally send us back to the character who embodies the radically opposed vision of time: Frank Troy. While the “rustic” characters staunchly believe in the virtue of continuity, Troy irrupts in the story out of nowhere. While Oak’s and, for that matter, Bathsheba’s family story are common knowledge and are being discussed in inns and communal gatherings, Troy’s ascendance has something fuzzy and unclear about it. Before being whispered by people like Liddy, it is first evoked by Boldwood, who confesses that “[a] slight romance attaches to him”: “His mother was a French governess, and it seems that a secret attachment existed between her and the late Lord Severn. She was married to a poor medical man, and soon after an infant was born” (89). Quite significantly then Troy’s past is a *broken* line, with something of a mystery attaching to his real father—as opposed to the linear ascendance of such characters as Oak, Bathsheba or the Smallburys. Although the thing is not stated quite explicitly, he is himself an illegitimate child, even before he—rather logically—begets Fanny’s illegitimate child in turn. And his broken relation with the family line is clearly symbolised by the gold watch, which he presumably holds from his aristocratic father, as suggested by the coronet and Latin motto engraved at the back. While Oak and Coggan treasure their old watches simply because they are family legacies, passed down from generation to generation, and thus preserving a sense of history, Troy is ready to part with his gold watch and almost force it upon a reluctant Bathsheba, as a token of his love. The irony is that those, like Oak, who hold useless watches still cling to them for affective reasons, whilst

Troy, whose watch *is* well and truly valuable, has no qualms whatever in giving it away to seduce the first comer. The fact that in all cases the symbolic inheritance, which is either treasured or squandered, is a *watch* turns the whole episode into a clear allegory of the characters' relation to time. The rustics' sense of continuity is opposed here to Troy's constant hurry.

From the moment he appears in a sudden illumination of Bathsheba's dark lantern, Troy is explicitly presented as living in the instant. His past is a very shady part of his life; and although he does claim that he wants to modernise Bathsheba's old house, and to turn himself into a "farmer of a spirited and very modern school" (200), it quickly becomes obvious that he has no future *either*. In truth, the narrator made this clear from the start, by explaining that "His outlook upon time was a transient flash of the eye now and then: that projection of consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy" (130). His love-story with Bathsheba will be as quick as lightning (as was very literally foretold by the sword exercise) and will not last more than a summer. While Gabriel is on the side of meditation and contemplation, judging the possible consequences of one's acts and seeing into the future (when he forecasts the weather for instance), Troy as to him rushes towards the deed at all speed and in so doing, also dashes towards his death, unawares. Their relation to love is quite symptomatic too: whereas Oak is content to wait indefinitely for Bathsheba's consent, Troy falls in love on the spur of the moment, and falls out of love just as quickly as he has married. One should note here that Boldwood is a rather uncomfortable mix of the two positions, passing abruptly from a state of placidity or even sentimental inertia to a state of agitation and precipitation which can only be destructive: one cannot not in impunity disturb the slow course of natural rhythms.

Yet Troy is not to be interpreted as a meaningless accident in the world of Wessex. On the contrary, he probably embodies the new race of men, born out of modern civilisation, whose crazy, heightened tempo no longer accords with the slow rhythms of nature. Within our "Darwinian" grid of interpretation, he might illustrate the notion of "maladaptation", that is the plight of those who have become so far divorced from natural rhythms that they can no longer fit their environment or find their place on earth. Hardy confided something of the sort in his diary in 1889: "A woeful fact—that the human race is too extremely developed for its corporeal conditions, the nerves being evolved to an activity abnormal in such an environment" (*Life* 227). Read in that light, Troy is just the prototype for heroes such as Jude and Sue in *Jude the Obscure*, whose nervous sensitiveness and agitation have forever cut them from their Wessex origins. By speeding up time inconsiderately, modern man has lost any possible congruity with the wider universe.

From the incredibly slow and all-encompassing time of geology which can only be measured in millions of years, to the principle of permanence and preservation through the centuries represented by ancient architecture, and then the mere linear succession of human generations, to end with the atomisation of time for such evanescent characters as Troy, Hardy's novel plays on the whole palette of time-scales, to show the progressive loss of correspondence between human beings and their larger universe. Nevertheless, Hardy's understanding of history may not be as univocal as that. One of the entries in his *Life* may puzzle the reader, when related to the events in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for it seems to uphold a vision of time as purely haphazard movement: "History is rather a stream than a tree. There is nothing organic in its shape, nothing systematic in its development. It flows on like a

thunderstorm-rill by a road-side; now a straw turns it this way, now a tiny barrier of sand that” (*Life*, 179). The metaphors used here clearly recall those characterising Oak and Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, since Oak is explicitly associated to the image of the rooted tree and the stability of the pedigree (also called “family tree”...), while Troy lives in a world of constant flux and uncertainty, merely drifting with the events and ending up carried away by the tide of a wild sea. And yet the striking thing is that the author in real life seemed to take positions actually opposed to the conservative vision illustrated in his early novels, and to stand rather by the side of the “modern”, though immoral, character. Hardy thus seems to have been aware that the movement of history was not as clearly stratified and understandable as he had dreamt of it in his fiction. This throws a new light on the novel, by showing that the more clear-sighted conception is *not* necessarily that of villagers clinging to an apparently rational organisation of the world. Hardy’s conclusion is far more sceptical than appears in the relatively protected world of Weatherbury, and consists in saying that the world is neither pure chaos nor a rational plan but a structure obeying laws which still escape man: “neither chance nor purpose governs the universe, but necessity” (*Life*, 364)—a quotation which brings us back to the unforeseeable and uncontrollable forces of his larger cosmic vision...

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