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## From *Wessex Poems* to *Time's Laughingstocks* : An eco-critical approach to the poetry of Thomas Hardy

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From  
*Wessex Poems*  
To  
*Time's Laughingstocks:*  
An Eco-Critical Approach to the  
Poetry of Thomas Hardy

by  
Adrian Geoffrey Tait

Submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy  
The Open University  
29 April 2010

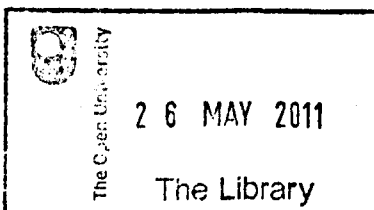
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# Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to re-evaluate the poetry of Thomas Hardy from an eco-critical perspective, and in so doing, show how and in what ways Hardy's poetic oeuvre represents a revealing response to the environment, and an important and still relevant comment on humankind's relationship to it.

As the Introduction explains in more detail, the thesis concentrates on the verse drama and verse collections published between 1898 and 1909. However, Chapter 1 opens with an eco-critical analysis of Hardy's earliest surviving poem, 'Domicilium', written 1857-60; the Chapter develops into a discussion of the origins of eco-criticism as a theoretical approach with a political edge. Chapter 2 discusses the complex Victorian concept of 'Nature', which shaped Hardy's own response to the environment. Chapter 3 engages with Hardy's career as a novel writer, and notes the way in which it informs his later poetry. Chapter 4 extends the eco-critical analysis to Hardy's poetry, focusing on *Wessex Poems*, his first verse collection. Although short, the collection shows how Hardy was already shaping his own poetic sense of the natural world. This theme is developed in Chapter 5, on *Poems of the Past and Present*, a collection notable for a series of poems with a bio-centric focus on the natural world in general and bird life in particular. Chapter 6 deals with *The Dynasts*, a retelling of the Napoleonic Wars through which Hardy dramatized his belief that all life on earth is connected by the workings of the 'Immanent Will'. Chapter 7 discusses *Time's Laughingstocks*, Hardy's bleakest reading of the human condition. The Conclusion analyses another individual poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain', written following the loss of the Titanic in 1912, and summarises Hardy's distinctive contribution to our emerging sense of what might constitute a meaningful 'eco-poetic'.



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This 4-year, part-time project would not have been possible without the support and forbearance of my family, to whom my efforts are respectfully dedicated.

## A Note on Texts

Unless otherwise indicated, the source text for poems from *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, *Poems of the Past and Present*, and *Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses*, is *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982-95), I (1982), and for *The Dynasts*, IV and V (1995).

Each poem is annotated with a numerical identifier prefixed by 'CP', for 'Complete Poems'. These identifiers are taken from the numbering system used in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), which is in widespread use by Hardy scholars as a convenient means of identifying the poems.

Individual texts are always referred to by their full titles in the text. Where there is a quotation from a work by Thomas Hardy, however, the associated reference is given in the form of an abbreviation, which is placed alongside the quotation. These abbreviations are listed separately below.

All other references follow the conventions set out by the Modern Humanities Research Association.

# List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used throughout:

- CL1-7**     *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982-95)
- CP**        *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001)
- CPW1-5**   *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Samuel Hynes, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982-95)
- FMC**       *Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd*, ed. by Suzanne B. Falack-Yi, new edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- JO**        *Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- LN1-2**     *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1985)
- LW**        *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Michael Millgate (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984, repr. 1985)
- MC**        *Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- PB**        *Thomas Hardy, A Pair of Blue Eyes*, ed. by Alan Manford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
- RN**        *Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native*, ed. by Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, repr. 1998)

- SL* Thomas Hardy, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990)
- TD* Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ed. by Tim Dolin (London: Penguin, 1998, repr. 2003)
- TT* Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, ed. by Suleiman M. Ahmad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, repr. 1998)
- TW* Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1998)
- UGT* Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, ed. by Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, repr. 1992)
- WP* Thomas Hardy, *Wessex Poems* (Ryburn: Keele University Press, 1995)

# Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to re-examine the poetry of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) in the light of eco-critical thinking, and in so doing, show how and in what ways it represents a distinctive and revealing response to the environment, and an intriguing and still relevant commentary on our relationship to it.

The thesis focuses on the verse drama and verse collections published between 1898 and 1909. In particular, it concentrates on *Wessex Poems*, *Poems of the Past and Present*, *The Dynasts*, and *Time's Laughingstocks*. However, it opens with a discussion of Hardy's earliest attempt at poetry, 'Domicilium', written 1857-60, and concludes by analysing another individual poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain', which was written and published in 1912.

Behind Hardy's poetic response to the natural world – his eco-poetic – lies a powerful, parallel process of change. During the nineteenth century, remarkable developments in the fields of history, astronomy, geology, and biology transformed humankind's view of the universe and its own place in it. Darwin's theory of evolution is only the most notable of those developments. The same spirit of scientific endeavour made possible a hitherto unimaginable process of industrialisation that utterly transformed humankind's ability to exploit the environment and changed the very terms of its involvement with it: during Hardy's own, albeit long lifetime, the lived-in traditions of a settled, rural society were swept away by a modern, rootless, urban existence everywhere dominated – in the workplace, on the street, at home – by the machine.



Hardy's suggestion that 'the slow silent walk' (l.2) of a ploughman and his horse was somehow inevitable and immutable was already anachronistic when 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' (CP500) was published in 1916, as Hardy was well aware; but he was also well aware that this was the way in which society nonetheless preferred to see itself. The continuing popularity of Hardy's novels suggests that this may be a difficulty with which many people still contend.

This is in itself a reason why Hardy's poetry is a valuable resource for the eco-critic. His concerns and difficulties remain our own: the issues with which he wrestles are still being played out, often in the context of what is now thought of as 'environmentalism'. The discussion that follows therefore combines 'historicism' and 'presentism', balancing a situated appreciation of Hardy's ideas with a reassessment that reflects recent environmental and eco-critical debates.<sup>1</sup> And whilst an eco-critical analysis can highlight or illuminate aspects of Hardy's verse that other critics may have overlooked, his idiosyncratic but deeply humanistic verse is its own kind of challenge to contemporary environmentalism, which sometimes tends towards exactly the kind of oversimplification against which its early critics warned: there can be no choosing between humankind and the environment, since both are inextricably linked and mutually interdependent, a point that Hardy, as an early and avid reader of Darwin, would readily have understood.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Presentism' refers to a form of literary and historical analysis that reinterprets the past in light of present-day views and beliefs. Although particularly associated with modern Shakespeare studies, 'presentism' is not new; see, for example, Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931). As Butterfield argued, such an approach may well be misleading, particularly when the past is interpreted in a way that emphasises or selects those elements that appear to anticipate more recent ideas. However, it can also be argued that any engagement with the past is by its very nature selective. On this basis, every generation must reinterpret the past in the light of its own concerns, its own beliefs. Given eco-criticism's roots in contemporary environmental concerns, a degree of 'presentism' is, perhaps, an inescapable part of its approach.

Although there is no intention of presenting Hardy as an environmentalist before the fact, the central argument of this thesis is that his verse can nonetheless be read as an eco-poetic. His verse reflects an honest insistence on thinking through some, although not all, of the difficulties and dilemmas associated with the dramatic changes through which he lived, changes that, as I have suggested, radically transformed both our attitudes towards and our relationships with the environment. They are changes with whose consequences we are still wrestling, and whose often catastrophic effects we have yet to manage or address. The environmental discussion has never been more important, and Hardy's verse has a contribution to make to it.

The structure of the thesis reflects the argument set out above. Hardy lived through a critical period of transition in humankind's relationship to its environment, and to the extent that his poetry reflects or refracts those changes, it can only be understood (or fully appreciated) in terms of them. At the same time, Hardy's career as a novelist undoubtedly informs and influences his poetry, which suggests that the poetry can only be approached by analysing the novels first, even if only in outline. Moreover, the thesis cannot proceed without first explaining what eco-criticism is. Each of these points warrants (and is given) separate, specific consideration in the pages that follow.

The structure and scope of the thesis are also affected by two other, more practical factors. The first is the way in which Hardy composed and subsequently published his verse, and the second is the sheer size of his poetic output.

Hardy composed his verse at various intervals throughout his life, but left no definitive history of when individual poems were written or how they were subsequently revised before publication. Whilst a strong case has been made for a poem-by-poem

chronology based on likely dates of composition, I have nonetheless chosen the more cautious route, and structured the thesis around the individual verse collections in which Hardy periodically gathered and published his poetry.<sup>2</sup>

The size of Hardy's poetic oeuvre creates a second, practical difficulty. Verse was his life's work, and his life was a long and productive one. Although only a proportion of Hardy's verse is relevant to the discussion that follows, it is simply not possible to address the entirety of a poetic output that includes some 948 poems and a 3-volume verse-drama within the constraints of a thesis limited to a total length of 100,000 words. Fortunately, it is possible to identify certain fault lines along which Hardy's poetic output can be divided more or less naturally. One of those fault lines is reflected in a single but noteworthy poem entitled 'The Convergence of the Twain' (CP248), or 'Lines on the loss of the "Titanic"', which was first published shortly after the loss of the great liner in 1912.<sup>3</sup> As I explain in greater detail in the Conclusion, 'The Convergence of the Twain' marks a change of tone and direction in Hardy's poetry, and it is therefore appropriate to draw the thesis to a close by discussing it. (The poem also represents a convenient if approximate mid-point in Hardy's poetic output.)

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

- **Chapter 1**, 'An Introduction to Eco-criticism', provides a practical demonstration of an eco-critical approach, and discusses its central principles and preoccupations.

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<sup>2</sup> See Taylor's three-part analysis: Dennis Taylor, 'The Chronology of Hardy's Poetry', *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 17.1-3 (2001-2).

<sup>3</sup> The Titanic sank on 15 April, 1912; Hardy completed the poem on 24 April, and it first appeared in a souvenir programme on 14 May before being reprinted in the *Fortnightly Review* in June, 1912. Richard Little Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954, repr. 1968), p.150.

- **Chapter 2**, 'The Victorian Concept of "Nature"', examines the way in which Victorians saw the natural world, and the interpretations they placed upon it.
- **Chapter 3**, 'The Novels of Thomas Hardy', evaluates Hardy's fiction from an eco-critical perspective.
- **Chapters 4 to 7** are dedicated to an eco-critical analysis of the verse and verse drama published between 1898 and 1909: *Wessex Poems* (Chapter 4), *Poems of the Past and Present* (Chapter 5), *The Dynasts* (Chapter 6), and *Time's Laughingstocks* (Chapter 7).
- The **Conclusion** completes my engagement with Hardy's verse, and summarises the original scholarship set out in the thesis as a whole.

# Chapter 1

## An Introduction to Eco-criticism

### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the origins of eco-criticism, outline its central concerns, and set out the approach taken by this thesis. The first section is, however, intended to provide a practical demonstration of an eco-critical approach. Entitled 'Hardy's Dwelling', it analyses Hardy's earliest attempt at verse, the poem 'Domicilium', and illustrates why an eco-critical approach could and should be brought to bear on Hardy's poetic oeuvre. The second section, 'The Emergence of Eco-criticism', provides a brief history of modern eco-criticism. The third section, 'Defining Eco-criticism', discusses the difficulties in defining an evolving movement whose origins in environmentalism result in widely differing versions of it. The final section, 'Provisional Activism: An Eco-critical Approach to the Poetry of Thomas Hardy', explains the position taken by this thesis, noting the degree to which it offers a dialogue with rather than a formal analysis of Hardy's verse.

### **Hardy's Dwelling**

It faces west, and round the back and sides  
High beeches, bending, hang a veil of boughs,  
And sweep against the roof. Wild honeysucks  
Climb on the walls, and seem to sprout a wish  
(If we may fancy wish of trees and plants)  
To overtop the apple-trees hard by.

Red roses, lilacs, variegated box  
Are there in plenty, and such hardy flowers  
As flourish best untrained. Adjoining these  
Are herbs and esculents; and further still  
A field; then cottages with trees, and last  
The distant hills and sky.

Behind, the scene is wilder. Heath and furze  
Are everything that seems to grow and thrive  
Upon the uneven ground. A stunted thorn  
Stands here and there, indeed; and from a pit  
An oak uprises, springing from a seed  
Dropped by some bird a hundred years ago.

In days bygone –  
Long gone – my father's mother, who is now

Blest with the blest, would take me out to walk.  
At such a time I once inquired of her  
How looked the spot when first she settled here.  
The answer I remember. 'Fifty years  
Have passed since then, my child, and change has marked  
The face of all things. Yonder garden-plots  
And orchards were uncultivated slopes  
O'ergrown with bramble bushes, furze and thorn:  
That road a narrow path shut in by ferns,  
Which, almost trees, obscured the passer-by.  
'Our house stood quite alone, and those tall firs  
And beeches were not planted. Snakes and efts  
Swarmed in the summer days, and nightly bats  
Would fly about our bedrooms. Heathcroppers  
Lived on the hills, and were our only friends;  
So wild it was when first we settled here.'

This is 'Domicilium', 'the earliest discoverable of young Hardy's attempts in verse' (*LW*, p.8). Written sometime in his late 'teens between 1857 and 1860, it describes Hardy's family home both as he knew it, and as it was when his grandparents lived there. The poem was not, however, published until 1916. By then, small fortunes had been made by artists with a knack for depicting picturesque country cottages ringed round with 'wild honeysucks' and 'red roses', pictures snapped up by a nation now made up almost

exclusively of city dwellers. Furthermore, that nation was now at war, and in its moment of crisis reached back to a comforting if illusory sense of itself as a country rooted in the land. Reading (in particular) the poem's opening two stanzas, one wonders if Hardy had this in mind in choosing to publish it when he did. In fact, the poem was printed privately, in a run of just twenty-five pamphlets, 'with the express condition that it is not to be published in any book or newspaper'.<sup>4</sup> A further twenty-five copies were printed in 1918, but they too were distributed only amongst friends, and the poem was not otherwise published during Hardy's lifetime. Whatever value he attached to the poem, he did not see it as part of a public body of poetry that by 1918 extended to a three-volume verse drama, *The Dynasts*, five verse collections, and a *Selected Poems* that would be followed within the year by the first *Collected Poems* (1919).

One can only speculate as to why Hardy did not wish to see the poem collected during his own lifetime. Perhaps he felt that it was a piece of juvenilia of interest only to friends; perhaps he felt that it was too different in style to his later, mature work; perhaps its subject matter was simply too personal. Whatever the reason, it has attracted little critical comment. Davie, Marsden, Zietlow and Paulin ignore it; Pinion and Bailey offer brief descriptions, but no analysis; and several anthologies, including Creighton and Armstrong, overlook it.<sup>5</sup> Yet the poem is a revealing response to a now much changed landscape. Beyond its opening description of the cottage – 'the first

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<sup>4</sup> Purdy, p.177.

<sup>5</sup> The works to which I refer are, in order: Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), Kenneth Marsden, *The Poems of Thomas Hardy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), Paul Zietlow, *Moments of Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), F. B. Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1976), J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), *Poems of Thomas Hardy: A New Selection*, ed. by T. R. M. Creighton (London: Macmillan, 1974), *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*, ed. by Tim Armstrong (Harlow: Longman, 1993).



house in the valley' (*LW*, p.8) – lies the wilder scene of 'heath and furze', of paths 'shut in by ferns', of swarming snakes and bats, and a place where heathcroppers (the *OED* gives this as a sheep or pony that crops the heath) 'were our only friends': 'so wild it was when first we settled here'.

Although it is recounted without fanfare, this sense of an amicable understanding between two worlds, one human, one natural is, perhaps, the most remarkable aspect of the poem. It is what should be meant by 'an accommodation': a dwelling which is itself a way of dwelling, a home that allows its assorted inhabitants to live together, unselfconsciously. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger remarked in his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking', 'the nature of building is letting dwell'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Hardy's description of his own 'domicilium' – the Latin phrase for dwelling or dwelling-place – recalls, or rather anticipates, Heidegger's description of a Black Forest farmhouse, 'built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants', and equally at ease in its environment: 'here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house.'<sup>7</sup>

Famously, Jonathan Bate invoked this description in his attempt to claim Heidegger for eco-criticism (2001).<sup>8</sup> Not all his readers were convinced.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it does suggest the possibility that we might find a way to live in some kind of balance with our environment, to live, therefore, in a sustainable way. 'Mortals dwell in that they

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', written 1950-9, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971), *Pratt Institute* <<http://mysite.pratt.edu/~arch543p/readings/Heidegger.html>> [accessed 30 September, 2009] (page 8 of 9).

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', p.8.

<sup>8</sup> See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> 'Yet, clearly, this will not do': see, for example, Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin, 'Earthsongs: Ecopoetics, Heidegger and Dwelling', *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, 18 (2002), 1-17 (p.5).

receive the sky as sky', wrote Heidegger; 'they do not turn night into day nor day into a harassed unrest'.<sup>10</sup>

Reading these words, one is reminded of the radical role of technology in transforming both our lives and our relationship to the natural world. This too concerned Heidegger, and in 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1955), he discussed the way in which the natural world had been reduced to a 'standing-reserve [Bestand]', valuable only in instrumental terms, because useful.<sup>11</sup> Modern technology, he wrote, 'puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such': 'the earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mining district'; the field 'appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain'.<sup>12</sup>

Change has similarly transformed the world of Hardy's poem. The cottage at Bockhampton still stands, but stands empty, a cob and thatch monument to a great writer, preserved by a trust (the National Trust) that, though formed in his own lifetime to conserve wild spaces just like this, made its name preserving country houses. The heath, which Hardy later made famous as 'Egdon', is now just a scrap of land, having been replanted by the Forestry Commission with a cash-crop of close-packed trees.<sup>13</sup> They are, as Heidegger predicted, no more than a 'standing-reserve'. Change has indeed marked 'the face of all things' (l.26). What we have in lieu of this moment of equipoise between people and place is Hardy's record of it, captured with 'obvious and

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. by William Lovitt (London: Garland, 1977), p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, p.14, p.14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, repr. 2001), p.5.

naive fidelity' (*LW*, p.8). (Perhaps Hardy, intending the pun, counted himself amongst the 'hardy flowers' that 'flourish best untrained' (l.8, l.9).)

But this too is only a partial explanation. There is no such thing as transparency in language or in literature, and nothing naive about Hardy's 'Wordsworthian lines' (*LW*, p.8), as he himself described them. It isn't simply that, as Gibson notes, Hardy's 'passable pastiche' reveals a firm grasp of structure and a growing feel for technical devices such as alliteration and assonance ('the blank verse is competent, the vocabulary wide-ranging, the control of rhythmic effects impressive').<sup>14</sup> Hardy's lines are a conscious part of a continuing literary tradition that reflects on but also interprets our relationship to our own environment, and our manner of dwelling within it.

That tradition – that pattern of response – has long been the subject of critical exegesis; in recent years, however, it has been subject to a more specialised form of cultural criticism that contextualises those responses in terms of contemporary environmentalist concern. Its name is 'eco-criticism' and, as the nexus of an emerging and unstable complex of interpretative approaches, it is discussed in greater detail in the following sections of this Chapter. Here, I simply wish to provide a brief, practical example of its use, and in so doing, demonstrate why eco-criticism might offer a fresh and relevant interpretation not only of an overlooked poem but, by extension, of a largely neglected body of work.

In the case of this poem, 'Domicilium', the eco-critic's next question may well seem obvious. If the poem in fact discloses a high degree of technical sophistication, and a profound indebtedness to a literary tradition that shapes and modifies our view of

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<sup>14</sup> James Gibson, *Thomas Hardy: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.10.

the natural world, how neutral and objective is Hardy's depiction of that moment of equipoise to which I have referred?

The clue may lie in the poem's backwards glance. Whether or not its tone is overtly nostalgic, the poem looks back to a better time. In fact, it looks back both to Hardy's own experience of the house in mid-century, and to his grandmother's recollections of it another half-century before, 'a memory within a memory'.<sup>15</sup> This is, of course, a key characteristic of the pastoral, which is how Taylor describes and defines the poem (a 'Wordsworthian pastoral').<sup>16</sup> The pastoral genre is in turn vital to the eco-critical examination of cultural responses to and constructions of the natural world.<sup>17</sup> Each memory of an idyllic past gives way to another, and another. Seeking the moment when the idyll materialises into a meaningful way of life to which we can refer back, we find 'no place, no period' in which to rest.<sup>18</sup> This is not to deny that Hardy's poem ultimately reflects a fundamental change in our relationship to the natural world, nor to suggest that Hardy's literary response to it is any the less valid for the way in which it is shaped by literary precedent or moulded by the example of another poet. His response is rooted in his own experience. Yet there is no doubt that what lies behind it is a tendency to idealise and in turn to simplify the complex realities of an extended process of transformation, a tendency that in turn tends to obscure, perhaps even to conceal. Eco-critical interest in this process is, perhaps, as predictable as it is necessary: environmentalism sometimes suffers from a similar tendency to look back to periods

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry: 1860-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.145.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*, p.145.

<sup>17</sup> See Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.37, and Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.9.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, repr. 1975), p.35.

when humankind lived in a state of apparent balance with its environment, as it perfectly possible to do in relation to this poem, and there a wider societal tendency to share a similarly nostalgic and distorted view of our rural past.

In Hardy's case, however, 'Domicilium' represents both a beginning and an end. Wordsworth's influence is unmistakable, but it is never again so explicit, and the poem itself does not so much conclude, as halt, abruptly, as if suddenly suspended: as Taylor remarks, the next poem in the *Complete Poems* (the first in *Wessex Poems*) is 'entirely different in tone, language, and meter'.<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom famously wrote of the anxiety of influence. Hardy appears remarkably resilient to it.

It is, of course, tempting to speculate why the poem ends so abruptly, and Taylor elsewhere ventures several possible reasons, amongst them Hardy's move (in 1862) to London, and the impact on Hardy of *The Origin of Species* (published in 1859).<sup>20</sup> Neither may have any direct bearing on the (un)finished poem, but they are suggestive possibilities, and they do have a wider relevance to the analysis of Hardy's verse. Take, for example, Taylor's suggestion that the poem's sudden conclusion reflects Hardy's move to London. In the context of the period, there was nothing remarkable about Hardy's relocation from the country to the city. During the course of the nineteenth century, many thousands of others made the same move. But in so doing, they contributed to an extraordinary transformation that profoundly affected Britain's relationship to, and completely reshaped, its environment. For the first time in the history of humankind, a nation abandoned a long-standing way of life rooted in the land and structured around the seasons, and embraced an urban, industrialised future

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<sup>19</sup> Dennis Taylor, 'Hardy and Wordsworth', *Victorian Poetry*, 24.4 (1986), 441-454 (p.448).

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*, p.145.

divorced from any daily contact with the non-human world. It was an abrupt and radical change with whose consequences we are still wrestling, and as Bate notes, the continuing popularity of Hardy's celebration of country life suggests that we have yet to accept it.<sup>21</sup> If so, it might be argued that Hardy's own creative response is itself part of that wider failure to embrace the world we have shaped for ourselves. In the choice of subject matter and style exemplified by a novel such as *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) for example, Hardy appears to reject the logic of his own move to the city, and instead look back to a world that, by 1862, the majority of Britons had also left behind. By contrast, 'Domicilium' offers the reader the honesty of a sudden ending; and if, as Taylor implies, Hardy's abruptly foreshortened poem reflects this discontinuity in his experience, this literal separation from the world of his childhood, it may be that his poetry – which he always regarded as the more personal, more important part of his body of work – offers us a different view of this great change in our relationship to our environment.

This change at least, was literal, physical, actual. The publication of *The Origin of Species* accentuated (even if it did not create) a different kind of schism. The impact of Darwin's book was then and today remains enormous: as I explain in more detail in Chapter 2, few other publications have had such an effect on our view of the natural world and our place in it. It undoubtedly had an early and profound effect on Hardy. 'As a young man', notes *The Life*, Hardy had been among its 'earliest acclaimers' (LW, p.158), and it played a part in a gradual loss of faith that extended beyond the simply religious to a growing disenchantment with conventional or contemporary views of a

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<sup>21</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, pp.1-3.

natural world from which all meaning and purpose appeared to have been emptied. For Joseph Warren Beach, in his landmark study of *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (1936), Hardy's verse therefore marks the point at which nature 'no longer has any value' as a subject for celebration or exaltation: 'Thomas Hardy', he adds, 'sounds the death-knell of the old nature-poetry'.<sup>22</sup>

We will see how and in what ways this is true, and how it relates to recent and growing anxiety at our impact on the environment; above all, we will see what Hardy (in *The Dynasts*) made of 'the vague aesthetic recognition of unity and pattern in things', as Beach dismissively described what was left of 'purposiveness' [sic] in the universe; but it may already be obvious why 'Domicilium' in particular and Hardy's verse in general marks a decisive break with the Romantic pattern of response to the natural world.<sup>23</sup>

That Hardy was nevertheless influenced by the Romantics is undeniable, and the influence is nowhere more important or obvious than in his view that 'in verse was concentrated the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature' (*LW*, p.51).<sup>24</sup> It is to this firm and unwavering conviction that critics and readers alike owe Hardy's life-long devotion to poetry, and an extraordinary and idiosyncratic oeuvre.

To date, however, eco-criticism has only touched on the work of Thomas Hardy, and overlooked the verse and verse drama almost entirely. In 'Speaking a Word for Nature' (1991), Scott Russell Sanders briefly discussed the pivotal role of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* (1878), but the discussion was brief and derived from D. H. Lawrence's penetrating (if partisan) remarks, published posthumously, in *Phoenix*

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1936, repr. 1966), p.521.

<sup>23</sup> Beach, p.521.

<sup>24</sup> See also Gibson, p.28.

(1936).<sup>25</sup> Nine years later, Richard Kerridge devoted an influential essay to 'Ecological Hardy' (2000), examining his significance in the context of novels like *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874); he too concentrated on *The Return of the Native* in building his case for Hardy's inclusion in the eco-critical canon.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, Bate opened his passionate and persuasive *Song of the Earth* (2000) with a discussion of the enduring popularity of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, focusing on Hardy's *The Woodlanders*.<sup>27</sup> In 2002, John Parham published an anthology based on papers presented at eco-critical conferences in 1997 and 1998, and this included Martin Ryle's essay 'After "Organic Community": Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature', with a further discussion of *The Woodlanders*.<sup>28</sup> For the moment, however, eco-criticism has got no further than these preliminary explorations, all of which focus on Hardy's novels. Yet Hardy's eco-critical importance is not in question. As Kerridge remarked:

Thomas Hardy is an obvious candidate for the eco-critical canon. The best known of English rural novelists, he is intensely responsive to the natural world and human relations with that world. Some of the most exciting passages of

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<sup>25</sup> Scott Russell Sanders, 'Speaking a Word for Nature' (1991), in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp.182-195.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000, repr. 2001), pp.126-142 (p.126).

<sup>27</sup> See Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.15-20.

<sup>28</sup> See Martin Ryle, 'After "Organic Community": Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature', in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. by John Parham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp.11-23 (p.19-23).



English nature writing are in his novels, integrated with a complexity of cultural, political, economic, and emotional life.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, and as I hope my opening discussion of 'Domicilium' has already gone some way to demonstrate, there is every reason to believe that Hardy's poetry is as deserving of eco-critical attention as the novels. The aim of the thesis therefore suggests itself: to realise a more rounded picture of Hardy's eco-critical significance, by dealing with what has so far been ignored – his verse and verse-drama.

Eco-criticism is, however, a recent arrival on the academic scene, and it is not one that is widely or well understood. Some may still think that, as Marilyn Butler once remarked (1997), it is simply 'old fashioned and nostalgic writing about nature under a new, trendy name'.<sup>30</sup> What follows is, therefore, an attempt to explain eco-criticism: to situate it in its historical context, explain its characteristics, and analyse its basis as a hybrid that draws on ecology and environmental ethics. In so doing, the intention is to establish the theoretical basis of the thesis as a whole, and identify its next steps.

## The Emergence of Eco-criticism

Although 'environmentally conscious criticism' existed before anyone thought to give it a name, 'eco-criticism' emerged as a recognisable theoretical school towards the

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<sup>29</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p.126.

<sup>30</sup> Butler was still more forthright about Bate's seminal 1991 work of British eco-criticism, *Romantic Ecology*: 'by far his worst book', she remarked. 'Swampy's smart set', from *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 4 July 1997, at the *ASLE Ecocritical Library* <<http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library>> [accessed 12 November 2009].

end of the 1980s, as advanced industrialised countries substituted their fear of one apocalypse (nuclear Armageddon) for another (global warming), and confidence in Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992) gave way to concern that the end of humankind was still possible. Various known as ecological literary studies, green cultural studies, eco-poetics, and environmental literary criticism, it began to surface in American universities and journals and at conferences in the early 1990s. Following the foundation of *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* in 1989, the Modern Language Association devoted a special session to eco-criticism in 1991. In 1992 an American Literature Association symposium was given over to nature writing, and new approaches to it; in the same year, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was formed, accompanied a year later, in 1993, by a journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE). Three years later, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm published *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), itself an eco-critical landmark, and an important source for this historical overview. In the UK, meanwhile, Jonathon Porritt announced *The Coming of the Greens* (1988), and eco-criticism found a British pioneer in Jonathan Bate, whose highly influential *Romantic Ecology* was published in 1991.<sup>31</sup> UK conferences on eco-criticism followed in 1996 and 1997, at Warwick, Lancaster, and Swansea universities, and in 1999 a British branch of ASLE was formed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathon Porritt and David Winner, *The Coming of the Greens* (London: Fontana, 1988); Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> See the paper prepared by Greg Garrard and Richard Kerridge on behalf of the English Subject Centre at Bath Spa University College on 6 May 2005 in response to a questionnaire on sustainability administered by the Higher Education Academy <[www.english.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk)> [accessed 4 May 2006], hereafter known as 'Garrard & Kerridge'; p.10.

Eco-criticism's success was quickly reflected in the many articles, essays, and books that now fill the bibliographical databases of organisations like ASLE.<sup>33</sup> In the United States, numerous anthologies quickly followed Glotfelty and Fromm, amongst them Branch, Johnson, Patterson and Slovic (1998), Murphy (1998), Anderson, Slovic and O'Grady (1999), Tallmadge and Harrington (2000), Armbruster and Wallace (2000), Adamson, Evans, and Stein (2002), and Branch and Slovic (2003).<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Buell, the leading American eco-critic, published monographs in 1995, 2003, and 2005.<sup>35</sup> In the United Kingdom, Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (1998), Laurence Coupe (2000), and Parham (2002) have published collections of eco-criticism, whilst Greg Garrard published an important introduction and overview, *Ecocriticism* (2004, in the New Critical Idiom series).<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Bate followed *Romantic Ecology* (1991) with *The Song of the Earth* (2000) and a biography of John Clare (2003).<sup>37</sup> Terry Gifford has also made important contributions, with *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary*

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<sup>33</sup> ASLE's online bibliography now has 1252 entries; *ASLE Online Bibliography*, at <<http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/ulman1/asle/default.htm>> [accessed 13 November 2009].

<sup>34</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm (*The Ecocriticism Reader*) and Armbruster and Wallace (*Beyond Nature Writing*) have previously been cited. In order, the other texts are *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, ed. by Michael P. Branch, and others (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1998); Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998); *Literature and Environment: a Reader on Nature and Culture*, ed. by Lorraine Anderson, Scott Slovic and John O. O'Grady (New York: Longman, 1999); *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, ed. by John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000); *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*, ed. by Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995); *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Parham (*The Environmental Tradition*) and Garrard have previously been cited. In order, the remaining works are *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), and *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000, repr. 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology* (previously cited); *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001); *John Clare* (London: Picador, 2003).

*Nature Poetry* (1995), and *Pastoral* (1999, also in the New Critical Idiom series).<sup>38</sup> Other important texts include Kate Soper's *What is Nature?* (1995) and Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995).<sup>39</sup> These are, furthermore, only the most notable (and more generalized) contributions to the field.

On this evidence alone, it would seem that eco-criticism enjoyed a successful founding decade. In fact, eco-criticism's success is more partial than this picture suggests. Writing in 2005, Buell remarked that eco-criticism 'has not yet achieved the standing accorded (say) to gender or postcolonial or critical race studies', whilst Gifford more recently (2008) noted that 'professional legitimation has been slow to come on both sides of the Atlantic'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, eco-criticism has been markedly more successful in the USA than in the United Kingdom, where it has won acceptance only slowly, if at all.<sup>41</sup> By September 2006, for example, ASLE-UK had only 47 members, and in November 2009, the membership still numbered only 80.<sup>42</sup>

There are a number of possible explanations. Perhaps the most obvious is that it has proven difficult for a discipline that challenges anthropocentric assumptions to take root in the 'humanizing sphere' of the arts.<sup>43</sup> In the context of the British academic establishment, it is also possible that eco-criticism has been seen as a return to a

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<sup>38</sup> Terry Gifford, *Green Voices; Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); *Pastoral* (previously cited).

<sup>39</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.1; Terry Gifford, 'Recent Critiques of Ecocriticism', *New Formations (Earthographies: Ecocriticism and Culture)*, 64 (2008), 15-24 (p.23).

<sup>41</sup> See Garrard & Kerridge, p.10.

<sup>42</sup> In a recent e-mail exchange with the writer (13 November, 2009), Dr. John Parham noted that, in the USA, ASLE membership is in the order of 1,000.

<sup>43</sup> Kerridge, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.5.

Leavisite faith in an organic society.<sup>44</sup> Both Jo Rawlinson and Coupe, for example, consider F.R. Leavis' and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933) a key early text and a 'provocative' and 'radical critique of contemporary urban civilization', a position that inadvertently echoes Terry Eagleton's contemptuous observation that 'organic societies are just convenient myths for belabouring the mechanized life of modern industrial capitalism'.<sup>45</sup> Eco-criticism may therefore suffer for its association with arguments that have long been rejected by what might now be regarded as the theoretical orthodoxy. It can hardly help that this orthodoxy includes post-modernism, with its distrust of 'the large-scale perspectives, political generalities, narrative time-scales and scientific vocabularies used in environmental debate'.<sup>46</sup>

There is, in any case, a purely practical explanation for eco-criticism's lack of acceptance, and it is lack of interest.<sup>47</sup> 'Notoriously, environmental issues come and go in public consciousness', Kerridge remarked in 1999, at the end of a decade in which, having emerged from the spectre of economic downturn, Western societies confidently reasserted their right to consume, and conveniently forgot the consequences.<sup>48</sup> Ten years later, another, still deeper economic crisis suggests that, for the moment, the only effective way of reducing our impact on the environment is a prolonged recession:

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<sup>44</sup> Garrard & Kerridge, p.11.

<sup>45</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.62, and Jo Rawlinson, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.221. See also Coupe, 'Bate and Leavis: An Ecocritical Connection', *Green Letters*, 2 (2000), 13-19. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, repr. 2002), p.31

<sup>46</sup> Kerridge, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.5, p.6.

<sup>47</sup> Garrard & Kerridge, p.10: they list 'perceived irrelevance' amongst both staff and students as one of several barriers to eco-criticism.

<sup>48</sup> Kerridge, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.2.

politicians and public alike still seem reluctant to confront the implications of a crisis whose existence many now accept.

Yet the most persuasive explanation for eco-criticism's difficulty may simply be that it is difficult to define, and therefore difficult to understand, recognise or accept. This definitional difficulty is a complaint which will not, it seems, go away. In the early days of eco-criticism, Sven Birkerts (writing in the *Boston Review* in 1996) noted that 'one cannot shed the sense of a rampant proliferation of perspectives and approaches'.<sup>49</sup> A decade later, Camilo Gomides argued that 'no consensus has emerged regarding its definition', whilst Sharon O'Dair complained of eco-criticism's 'definitional laxity'.<sup>50</sup> This notwithstanding, several critics and commentators refer back to one of the earliest of definitions, even as they describe it as preliminary (Birkerts) or in need of tightening (Gomides) or as simply one of several provisional definitions (Garrard).<sup>51</sup>

That definition is Glotfelty's, and it simply states that eco-criticism is 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'.<sup>52</sup> Modified only a little, it underpins ASLE's current 'mission statement'.<sup>53</sup> I have, therefore, taken it as the starting point for the next sections of this chapter, which set out to explain why defining

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<sup>49</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'Only God Can Make a Tree: the Joys and Sorrows of Ecocriticism', in *The Boston Book Review*, 3.1 (1996), p.2, *ASLE Web Site* <<http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/tree/>> [accessed 1 October 2009] (page 1 of 7).

<sup>50</sup> Camilo Gomides, 'Putting a New Definition of Eco-criticism to the Test: the Case of *The Burning Season*, a Film (Mal)Adaptation', *ISLE*, 13.1 (2006), 13-23 (p.13); Sharon O'Dair, 'The State of the Green: A Review Essay on Shakespearian Ecocriticism', quoted by Simon C. Estok, 'The Muddy Shakespearian Green: Theorising Shakespearian Ecocriticism', in *Green Letters*, 11 (2009), 83-92 (p.84).

<sup>51</sup> Birkerts, p.2, Gomides, p.13, Garrard, p.3.

<sup>52</sup> Glotfelty, in Glotfelty and Fromm, p.xviii.

<sup>53</sup> Eco-criticism's focus now includes 'culture along with literature and the physical environment'; see the *ASLE Home Page* <<http://www.asle.org/site/about/>> [accessed 13 November 2009].

eco-criticism is so troublesome – and to venture a clear statement of the eco-critical perspective that underpins this thesis.

### Defining Eco-criticism(s)

Simply defined (by Glotfelty, 1996) as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment', eco-criticism took as its starting point the reality of impending ecological collapse and as its basis a simple proposition: no planet, no future.<sup>54</sup> Drawing strength from contemporary environmentalism, it set out 'to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis'.<sup>55</sup> In so doing, it would debate 'Nature' in order (as Coupe put it) 'to defend nature'.<sup>56</sup> That dedication to what Buell described as 'environmental praxis' – but others called activism – was reflected in Soper's rejection of the argument that nature did not exist beyond the text:<sup>57</sup>

In short, it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. by Glotfelty and Fromm, p.xviii.

<sup>55</sup> Kerridge, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.5.

<sup>56</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.5.

<sup>57</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.430; for an alternative interpretation of the word 'praxis', see Steven Hartman, 'The Rise of American Ecoliterature', in *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 39:2 (2007), 41-58 (p.47).

<sup>58</sup> Soper, p.151.

In spite of its apparent simplicity, however, the 'first wave' of eco-criticism revealed by these characteristics was in several respects problematical. The assumption at its heart – the assumption of global environmental crisis – was then and remains controversial. For so-called 'cornucopians', there is no such thing.<sup>59</sup> For postmodernists, there never can be: the concept of a global crisis implies the kind of grand narrative whose existence they globally deny (this may be their own grand narrative). 'According to universally disempowering postmodernist logic,' Coates remarks, 'environmental threats (like everything else) are socially constructed and culturally defined: there are no shared, universal threats – different groups privilege those confronting their own particular interests.'<sup>60</sup> The further difficulty is that, if the scientific picture 'remains far from complete', it may be argued that what some might see as crisis others may regard as 'change'.<sup>61</sup> Humankind has always interacted with and affected its environment; so has every other living creature.

Nonetheless, many would now argue that (to a greater or lesser degree) crisis is a matter of fact. Humankind is affecting the biosphere on a scale out of all proportion to its relative importance, and at a rate that outstrips the biosphere's ability to absorb its impact. That is what is meant by a loss of biodiversity: we are losing species faster than they multiply. No one species has ever affected the planet so systematically or severely. Nor is there any doubt that humankind will also suffer the consequences of the crisis it has created, even if the nations most responsible for creating global

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<sup>59</sup> Garrard, p.17.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p.185-6.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Allaby, *Basics of Environmental Science*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2000), p.13.



warming – the advanced industrialised countries – are also (by virtue of their relative wealth) best equipped to survive it.

This notwithstanding, there is still no consensus on the cause or causes of environmental crisis, even where the fact of crisis is now accepted. It is a discussion central to any understanding of the eco-critical project, not least because, today, there is no one 'project', no one position, but an array of eco-criticisms more or less aligned with a spread of environmentalist positions, from light to dark green, and further complicated by their engagement with individual political platforms (notably Marxist and feminist).

It is therefore essential to begin with some appreciation of why we might now find ourselves in the midst of environmental crisis. Attfeld (1991) provides a useful starting point. He lists five possible explanations for environmental crisis: population growth, affluence, technological development, capitalism, and economic growth itself.<sup>62</sup> In the case of population growth, the world's population has doubled to 6 billion in less than 40 years, and a rising population is directly linked to the increasing use of scarce resources and to rising levels of pollution: 97% of births are in lesser-developed countries, and it is these countries that are more likely to degrade their own environments in search of economic growth. At the same time, however, advanced industrialised countries consume more – up to forty times more – and pollute more, despite a low rate of population growth.<sup>63</sup> This suggests that the problem is not population growth *per se*, but the *distribution* of resources; it can, perhaps, be linked to rising levels of affluence and increasing consumption in advanced industrial countries. Equally, the impact of

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<sup>62</sup> Robin Attfeld, *Ethics of Environmental Concern*, 2nd edn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), p.9-17.

<sup>63</sup> Allaby, p.279.

technology and technological development – and the environmentally damaging forms of production that result – cannot be discounted. At the same time, however, technology can also bring environmental benefits; and in any case, what *stimulates* the creation of polluting technologies? With its relentless pursuit of profit, capitalism would seem to be the obvious explanation – except that unfettered growth is in itself a potential explanation, since economies (and populations) may grow regardless of the extent to which they can be regarded as ‘capitalistic’.

Clearly, the debate is a complex one, and perhaps the point is that no one explanation is itself adequate. Each seems to be interlinked. Each also seems to be connected to humankind’s sudden shift from a ten-thousand year old dependency on agriculture to an urban existence driven by industrialization. ‘From the life of the field to the life of the city’, one Edwardian observed, this was ‘the largest secular change of a thousand years’.<sup>64</sup>

Industrialization was not, of course, possible without capitalism or technological development, but it was industrialization that freed humankind from its dependence on the environment, making population growth possible and urbanization likely. At the same time, industrialization brought with it rising levels of affluence, which in turn made economic growth both possible and necessary. ‘The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe’, wrote Engels and Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848); ‘it must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’.

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<sup>64</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, quoted in Jamie Camplin, *The Rise of the Plutocrats: Wealth and Power in Edwardian England* (London: Constable, 1978), p.30.

All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.<sup>65</sup>

This account of 'the seemingly limitless powers of the modern economy' remains unsurpassed.<sup>66</sup> It explains a restless and insatiable dynamic that has harnessed and enabled all the individual elements identified by Attfield, and created an expanding society able to sustain growth for the first time in human history.<sup>67</sup> Global in scale, scope, and success, that 'modern economy' has neither been derailed by world wars nor revolutions. Above all, it has isolated its lucky beneficiaries from the eco-system on which they continue to depend.

Here, I should note that the world's first industrial nation was Britain, and its period of greatest change – its age of transition – was Victorian. This was the age through which Hardy lived and at whose close he began the systematic publication of

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<sup>65</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin, 2002), p.223. The text used here is that of the first English edition of 1888.

<sup>66</sup> Jones, in Marx and Engels, p.5.

<sup>67</sup> 'Until about the last two centuries in every part of the world nearly everyone lived on the edge of starvation'; Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p.88.

his verse. It was also an age visibly marked – one might say overshadowed – by the environmental impact of transformation:

The Industrial Revolution had brought with it a pall that hung over all the major cities, made up of the coal smoke, dirt and dust pouring out of millions of chimneys, together with the mist that these prevented from being burned off by the sun.<sup>68</sup>

By the 1880s, Britons had coined the phrase 'day darkness' to describe this 'perpetual pall'.<sup>69</sup>

Notwithstanding its obvious and appalling impact, however, the transformation continued, gathered pace, and spread globally. It continues to do so. But whilst industrialisation may as a mechanism explain how humankind has pushed the planet to the edge of environmental catastrophe, it does not to explain why humankind has allowed it to happen. After all, we depend on the planet, yet seem content to abuse and exploit it to the point of systemic collapse. This is strange indeed, and it suggests that the facts of transformation may be less important than the systems of belief that have underpinned it. If so, it may be that we should seek reasons for our casually destructive and disregarding attitude towards the environment in the interplay between religious, scientific, political, and philosophic values. We might even speculate that our deep-rooted and deeply anthropocentric view of the environment has over the centuries been

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<sup>68</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House* (London: Harper, 2003, repr. 2004), p.370.

<sup>69</sup> Flanders, p.370.

legitimised, at least amongst the advanced industrialised countries of the West, by our spiritual worldview, by our science, and by our belief in and pursuit of progress.

This argument underpins Lynn White Jr's article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' (1967), an article whose publication many consider a pivotal moment in the development of environmentalist thought. It is undeniably controversial, but by virtue of its importance and influence, unavoidable. In the article, White declared that Christianity 'is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen'.<sup>70</sup> 'We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis', he wrote, 'until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man'.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, modern Western science is itself 'cast in a matrix of Christian theology'.<sup>72</sup> Fused with the exploitative attitude that is Christianity's medieval legacy, it offers a specious objectivity and neutrality as a basis for action – and as a substitute for a meaningful ethical dimension – whilst providing reductionistic, mechanistic, and deterministic models that simply do not help us to understand the complex web of relationships within ecosystems. Furthermore, even our 'implicit faith in perpetual progress' is rooted in, 'and is indefensible from, Judaeo-Christian teleology'.<sup>73</sup> It supports the powerful legacy of Enlightenment programmes of modernisation, whether individualist (classical liberal) or collectivist (classical Marxist).

According to the Deep Ecology movement, it is only in these terms that our environmental predicament can be understood; by extension, eco-critical literary

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<sup>70</sup> Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155 (1967), 1203 – 1207 (p.1205).

<sup>71</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', p.1207.

<sup>72</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', p.1206.

<sup>73</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', p.1205.

analysis can only be effective if it accepts them. Amongst the most radical forms of environmentalism, the Deep Ecology movement reflects a broad family of environmental positions associated, in particular, with the work of the philosophers Arne Naess, Bill Devall, Warwick Fox, and George Sessions. Deep Ecologists see the underlying cause of environmental crisis as a metaphysical worldview that is at once individualistic, and reductionistic; it implies a belief that an entity can be explained independently of its relationship with others and with its environment, and a belief that by reducing objects to their most basic elements we arrive at a more fundamental level of reality, when ecology suggests that the reverse may be true. This worldview in turn underpins an economic system that rewards selfishness, competition, consumption, and its key driver is the sense that we are separate (alienated) from rather than an inseparable part of the environment.

Deep Ecologists therefore argue for a metaphysical holism that recognises that systems and relationships are just as (if not more) real than individuals; the 'man-in-environment' image must be replaced 'in favour of a relational, total-field' perspective.<sup>74</sup> As Fox remarks, 'to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of Deep Ecological consciousness'.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the conclusions of a reductionistic science are often no more than 'statements of ignorance'.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, environmental sciences like ecology are no substitute for philosophical analysis, nor for the 'ought' of ethics; Allaby is only echoing the broad mass of scientific opinion when he remarks that moral

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<sup>74</sup> Arne Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep', *Inquiry*, 16 (1973), 95-100 (p.95).

<sup>75</sup> Warwick Fox, quoted in Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), p.66.

<sup>76</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, trans. and rev. by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.26.

judgment 'has no place in scientific argument; to a scientist the phrase is meaningless'.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, technological 'fixes' are no substitute for fundamental changes in human behaviour and outlook.<sup>78</sup> The starting point for change must be the recognition of the inherent value liberally distributed throughout the environment: 'the basic intuition is that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth'.<sup>79</sup> That value is 'independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes', and it underwrites the principle of biocentric equality (or 'biospherical egalitarianism') whose practice may be encapsulated in the simple phrase, 'tread lightly on the earth'.<sup>80</sup>

Deep Ecology has been widely influential, not least in shaping the outlook of eco-critics; its variants 'recur most often' in Garrard's account of the eco-critical project, and it informs my own theoretical perspective.<sup>81</sup> However, Deep Ecology has also and inevitably attracted criticism. Echoing the troubling ambiguities identified by Bramwell *et al* in the environmentalist tradition as a whole, the movement has been criticized for its misanthropy: it prioritises the environment over humankind, and the collective over the individual.<sup>82</sup> Deep Ecologists like Fox counter that it is not humans they criticise, but

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<sup>77</sup> Allaby, p.9.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph R. Des Jardins, *Environmental Ethics: an Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 3rd edn (London: Wadsworth, 2001), p.216.

<sup>79</sup> Devall and Sessions, p.67.

<sup>80</sup> *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. by George Sessions (London: Shambhala, 1995), p.68; Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep', 95-100 (p.95); Devall and Sessions, p.68.

<sup>81</sup> Garrard, p.20.

<sup>82</sup> Kerridge, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.7: eco-criticism's alignment with the green tradition assumes that 'green' history is uncontroversial, but Bramwell, Biehl and Staudenmaier, and Grove 'are among those who have found the "green" tradition much more ambiguous, demonstrating that environmentalism has fascist and colonialist forms, as well as radical and humanitarian'. See Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995), and Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

'rather human-centeredness (a legitimating ideology)'.<sup>83</sup> Deep Ecologists do not deny that humans have intrinsic value: 'they simply deny that only humans have intrinsic value'.<sup>84</sup>

Another criticism is that not all humans (for example, those living in lesser developed countries) are responsible for environmental crisis. As Guha (1989) argues, many who still live in long-settled 'agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature'.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, many more are also and in turn oppressed by that 'dominant worldview'.<sup>86</sup> This is a point also raised by social ecologists, who argue that 'the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human', and eco-Marxists, who continue to identify 'class conflict as the key political issue'.<sup>87</sup> It also represents an important idea for eco-feminists, who see in the exploitation of the environment the same 'logic of domination' that shapes attitudes towards women: the anthropocentric dualism that implies that humankind is somehow separate from and superior to the environment reinforces an *androcentric* dualism that 'confers superiority upon men'.<sup>88</sup> Women, notes Victoria Davion, 'have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract'.<sup>89</sup>

Insofar as environmental movements (and eco-critical positions) such as social ecology, eco-Marxism, and eco-feminism are aligned with or derive from existing and

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<sup>83</sup> Fox, quoted in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions, p.279.

<sup>84</sup> Des Jardins, p.228.

<sup>85</sup> Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique', in *Environmental Ethics*, 11 (Spring 1989), 71-83 (p.75).

<sup>86</sup> Des Jardins, p.229.

<sup>87</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982), p.1; Garrard, p.30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ecological Feminism*, ed. by Karren J. Warren (London: Routledge, 1994), p.129; Garrard, p.23.

<sup>89</sup> Victoria Davion, cited in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. by Warren, p.9.



conventional political approaches, they remain rooted in an anthropocentric intellectual tradition that originates with the Enlightenment. By contrast, post-Modernism rejects this legacy *in toto*, and, as we have seen, the very idea of a meta-theory such as 'global environmental crisis'. However, post-Modernism's rejection of the Western intellectual tradition also highlights an important inherent contradiction within Deep Ecology, whose very name suggests a close affinity with the scientific tradition it indicts for its reductionism. In practice, the relationship is an uneasy one – 'where intuition and science clash, the former typically wins out' – but the problem is not confined to Deep Ecology.<sup>90</sup> As I have suggested, an intimate link between eco-criticism and the science of ecology is, like its connection with environmental ethics, one of its defining characteristics. As White argued, however, modern science may itself be implicated in our damaging exploitation of the environment.

Once again, some explanation is essential if we are to understand the shape and nature of contemporary eco-criticism. The earliest views of universe – the Greek cosmology of Aristotle and Ptolemy, for example – conceived of it as an organic whole. In time, these views were challenged by Copernicus (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, 1543), Galileo (*The Starry Messenger*, 1610), and Newton (*Principia*, 1687), through whose influences the universe instead came to be seen as mechanical and clockwork. The crucial 17<sup>th</sup> century developments were, however, Baconian induction and Cartesian dualism. Bacon declared that generalizations were to be based only on observed evidence (induction), and not built out of supposedly self-evident premises (deduction); thus constructed, scientific experimentation would provide 'the

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<sup>90</sup> Garrard, p.23.

power to conquer and subdue [nature], to shake her to her foundations'.<sup>91</sup> Descartes announced that the universe was divided into matter that could think (subject) and that which could not (object). Only that which could think had a soul (humankind), whilst that which did not (the animal kingdom) was a mere automaton: animals were 'thoughtless brutes', insensible, and incapable of feeling pain.<sup>92</sup> Together, these developments reinforced the rise of positivism, and the replacement of eco-centric with anthropocentric attitudes. The Enlightenment supplied the wholehearted conviction that scientific discovery would necessarily benefit humankind. In turn, science gave rise to the social sciences, and in particular, economics, which regularly and without fail conceived of the environment as a resource for the exclusive use of humankind.

There is, however, a contrary argument. Science is certainly concerned to challenge mythical with rational explanations, but this is no reason to believe that it is opposed to environmentalism.<sup>93</sup> In fact, scientific development also gave rise to ecology, a specialised discipline fundamental to the environmental sciences and to an informed and eco-centric approach to the environment. Ecology has its roots in the concept of evolution, which was variously articulated by Empedocles, Erasmus Darwin, and Lamarck, but most successfully and famously advanced by Charles Darwin (1809-82). Evolution challenged both the scientific and religious emphasis on humankind's separation from and superiority to the natural world. As Darwin argued, plants and

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press) p.36.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Des Jardins, p.96.

<sup>93</sup> For a succinct summary of the origin of this 'love of wisdom', see Allaby, p.11.

animals were bound by 'a web of complex relations', and humankind was therefore simply one branch of an organic tree of life.<sup>94</sup>

By default, Darwin formulated concepts that were fundamental to ecology: interdependence and interrelatedness. Indeed, Darwin provided the inspiration for Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), who first coined the term 'ecology' in 1866.<sup>95</sup> The earth was a single 'household' (from the Greek *oikos*), the study of which (*logos*) would be ecology's aim: simply, it was to be 'the science that studies living organisms in their home or environment'.<sup>96</sup> Haeckel's definition was reinforced by the work of Arthur Tansley (1871-1955) who, in 1935, advanced a still more radical concept that took into account both biotic and abiotic components, 'not only the organisms-complex, but also the whole complex of physical factors forming what we call the environment of the biome':

It is the systems so formed which, from the point of view of the ecologist, are the basic units of nature on the face of the earth. These ecosystems, as we may call them, are of the most various kinds and sizes. They form one category of the multitudinous physical systems of the universe, which range from the universe as a whole down to the atom.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. by J. W. Burrow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, repr. 1984), p.125.

<sup>95</sup> Lincoln Allison, *Ecology and Utility: The Philosophical Dilemmas of Planetary Management* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), p.26.

<sup>96</sup> Des Jardins, p.168.

<sup>97</sup> Alfred Tansley (1935), quoted in Frank Golley, *A History of the Ecosystem Concept in Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p.8.

Tansley's concept of the ecosystem first appeared in the journal *Ecology* in 1935, and remains central to the discipline. It is also central to environmental ethics, with which eco-criticism is also and necessarily linked. The relationship between ecology and environmental ethics is not, however, direct. A thing is not necessarily right because it is natural; this is the 'naturalistic fallacy' discussed by Moore (1903).<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, it is perfectly possible to conclude that a living system – an ecosystem – has a teleology associated with its natural stability. That was the profoundly influential conclusion of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1948), which proposed a 'land ethic' based on the simplest of principles. 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,' he wrote; 'it is wrong when it tends otherwise.'<sup>99</sup>

The difficulty with such a concept is its assumption that ecosystems naturally tend towards equilibrium. If there is no such thing as the 'so-called "balance of nature"', there is no measure of what is right or wrong.<sup>100</sup> Significantly, it may be argued that this is the case: more recent studies in ecology have adopted the chaos model suggested by complexity science, and argued that ecosystems are in fact unpredictable and prone to random, major change.<sup>101</sup>

This 'ecology of natural disturbance' has significant implications for environmentalism and, by extension, for eco-criticism.<sup>102</sup> This can be illustrated by turning it on a foundational work of modern environmentalism such as Rachel Carson's

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<sup>98</sup> See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

<sup>99</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949, repr. 1968), p.224-225.

<sup>100</sup> Allaby, p.9.

<sup>101</sup> See, in particular, Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>102</sup> Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.58.

*Silent Spring* (1962). Carson's exposé of the horrifying impact of agricultural pesticides (such as DDT) opens with an idyllic evocation of a latter-day pastoral, 'where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings'.<sup>103</sup> In this 'Fable for Tomorrow', however, the landscape is overtaken by 'a strange blight', a 'shadow of death', and the 'checkerboard of prosperous farms' becomes a 'stricken world'.<sup>104</sup> The cause is chemical: pesticides, fungicides, herbicides; and 'the people had done it to themselves'.<sup>105</sup>

As Garrard explains, Carson's modern-day parable is persuasive for a number of reasons, not least because of the way that she appropriated two powerful literary tropes: the pastoral, which implies 'a picture of essential changelessness', and the apocalypse, which in turn derives its impact from the certainty that there is a state of grace from which to fall.<sup>106</sup> Both, however, assume some state of unchanging harmony, and it is highly debatable whether these rhetorical devices would have the same power if disequilibrium has replaced equilibrium.<sup>107</sup> Buell counters that 'environmental rhetoric rightfully rests on moral and especially aesthetic grounds *rather than* scientific'.<sup>108</sup> It is also, as Botkin notes, 'psychologically uncomfortable' to abandon a long-standing belief 'in the constancy of undisturbed nature'.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, it is in practical terms more difficult to justify the need to preserve or conserve if there is no natural 'order' to save or safeguard.

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<sup>103</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964), p.2.

<sup>104</sup> Carson, p.3, p.4

<sup>105</sup> Carson, p.4.

<sup>106</sup> Garrard, p.1.

<sup>107</sup> Garrard, p.3.

<sup>108</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.46

<sup>109</sup> Botkin, p.188.

When eco-criticism was first characterised by Glotfelty, she predicted that it would follow a trajectory much like Elaine Showalter's model of the development of feminist criticism.<sup>110</sup> The first stage would address representations of nature in literature, such as pastoral and wilderness. The second would deal with the recovery of a distinctive, eco-critical literary tradition from the rich history of nature writing, as neglected writers like Gilbert White and Richard Jeffries, Henry Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and Edward Abbey were pushed to the fore. The third stage, of increasing theoretical sophistication, would not only 'go beyond nature writing', as Armbruster and Wallace put it in 2001, but beyond the simple opposition of nature and culture.<sup>111</sup> The prediction was correct. Today, what Buell (2005) calls a "'second" or newer revisionist wave' has widened its remit to take into account new themes, topics, and tropes, breaking down even as it has redefined its initial focus on literature and the physical environment.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, and whilst once strongly anti-theoretical in outlook and minatory in tone, eco-criticism has lost its polemical edge as it has gained in critical sophistication. We have already seen how a post-modern ecology might undermine its moral certainties, but the growing realisation that humankind's impact on the environment is linked to economic inequality has led both to a surge of interest in the concept of environmental justice, and to eco-criticism's reformulation as a form of

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<sup>110</sup> Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. by Glotfelty and Fromm, p.xxii-xxiv.

<sup>111</sup> *Beyond Nature Writing*, ed. by Armbruster and Wallace, p.1, p.2.

<sup>112</sup> Buell adds that any 'first-second division should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession'; see *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.17, pp.21-8. Buell's account of these 'two waves of development in ecocriticism' is discussed (not without issue) by Terry Gifford, in 'Recent Critiques of Ecocriticism', *New Formations*, 15-24 (p.15).

'social' ecology.<sup>113</sup> A similar shift – this time towards eco-feminism - followed the realisation that there may be a parallel between *mankind's* ruthless exploitation of the environment, and patriarchal patterns of domination within society. Through shifts such as these, eco-criticism's post-political platform has in effect been reabsorbed into the established positions it sought to escape. Above all, its emphasis on practice over theory has not stopped theory complicating what first seemed so straightforward. It is 'not language which has a hole in its ozone layer', Soper memorably declared, but as Garrard observes, it now appears that neither does the planet: 'the terms "hole" and "layer" are strictly metaphorical'.<sup>114</sup>

And yet the idea of 'a discrete identifiable hole' successfully popularized an actual and irreducible problem; that it did so by exploiting the 'conviction that science speaks objectively and disinterestedly' is not only a vital reminder that 'scientific problems are never fully separable from cultural and political ones', but a reminder that the mediation through metaphor of an issue like ozone depletion is exactly the kind of transaction that eco-criticism should subject to rigorous scrutiny.<sup>115</sup> *That*, Garrard concludes, is entirely 'congruent with the *critical realism* elaborated by Soper in her analysis as a whole'.<sup>116</sup>

Two points follow. Firstly, Garrard's argument firmly emphasizes the need to pay close attention to the way in which language formulates our concepts of crisis and effectively determines our response to it: as Buell notes, rhetoric has always been an

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<sup>113</sup> As Buell remarks of this 'environmental justice revisionism', issues of 'environmental welfare and equity' are of 'more pressing concern to the impoverished and socially marginalised' than nature preservation; *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.112.

<sup>114</sup> Soper, p.151; Garrard, p.167.

<sup>115</sup> Yearley, quoted in Garrard, and Garrard's own observations, p.168. This is the point at which environmental science 'gives way' to environmentalism or environmental campaigning; see Allaby, p.9.

<sup>116</sup> Garrard, p.168; this paragraph adapts his argument.

understandable and important interest for environmental critics.<sup>117</sup> Secondly, it reflects a continuing and foundational eco-critical belief that the natural world nonetheless pre-exists and is ultimately independent of our culturally constructed idea of it. Given the apparent difficulty in formulating any simple sense of what eco-criticism might now be, this is particularly important. Nature may be, as Williams suggested, 'the most complex word in the language', but nature nonetheless has a meaning beyond its place 'within a signifying system': it is not, or is not only, 'a linguistic construct'.<sup>118</sup> To admit this is to admit that the claims of the material world are real. To argue otherwise – to argue that nature exists *only* as 'signified within human culture' – is to believe that it has 'no intrinsic merit, no value and no rights', and so to underwrite our unthinking destruction of the environment.<sup>119</sup>

Equally, and to return to my first point, we cannot then exclude signification in emphasising reference; a poem may *refer* to a mountain or lake (a mountain or lake that really exists), but it may also *signify* or carry (through metaphor, symbol, allusion) other meanings. Its nuances have a profound impact on how we relate to (and impact on) our environment.

We again encounter the circular relationship between humankind and its environment that culture registers and modifies: consciousness creates culture; from culture proceeds the eco-poetic that rues the loss of intimacy brought about by (self) consciousness; self-consciousness is at once the unfortunate by-product of human evolution and the antidote to that evolutionary isolation; and an eco-poetic is therefore

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<sup>117</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.45.

<sup>118</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, revised edn (London: Fontana, 1983, repr. 1988), p.219; *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.2, p.3.

<sup>119</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.2.



reflexive and self-aware, since self-awareness cannot be undone. (It is not the least interesting aspect of Hardy's verse that it emphasises his sense of this evolutionary over-development, and rues the way in which it exposes humankind to an awful sense of its own isolation in an otherwise unthinking and certainly uncaring universe. This is the kind of awareness that can rarely be undone.) In Coupe's words, 'beyond duality, beyond the opposition of mind and matter, subject and object, thinker and thing, there is the possibility to 'realise' nature.'<sup>120</sup>

Understanding the interplay between culture and the environment is central to the eco-critical project, just as it is fundamental to humankind's continued survival. Its practical implications can quickly be demonstrated. Garrard notes that, notwithstanding eco-criticism's diversity and complexity, it repeatedly returns to a handful of 'tropes', or 'large-scale metaphors', amongst them the concept of wilderness.<sup>121</sup> For a body of American eco-critics, this is a place independent of people that nonetheless provides spiritual sustenance to the world weary through a pattern of solitary retreat and return. This 'nature endorsing' approach places great value on a form of writing that self-consciously isolates itself from any account of (human) social relationships.<sup>122</sup> This in turn underwrites Buell's early (1995) remark that Richard Jeffries, not Hardy, should be considered 'Thoreau's English counterpart', because Hardy deals with 'people in place', not 'place itself'.<sup>123</sup> And yet ecology is (as we have seen) the study of living organisms in their home or environment, separated neither physically (by the creation of 'wilderness' areas) nor psychologically (for example, by Cartesian dualism). This,

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<sup>120</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.1.

<sup>121</sup> Garrard, p.7.

<sup>122</sup> Ryle, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.11-23 (p.12).

<sup>123</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.105, p.255.

contrary view is reflected in an alternative, arguably European, sense that place and people are inextricably linked, and necessarily so, since this kind of a living relationship is the environmental key to right-thinking behaviour. We return to the concept of dwelling with which I introduced this Chapter, where, *pace* Heidegger, to dwell is to be alert to the environment and embedded within it in a relationship that 'does not dominate, manipulate, pollute or destroy'.<sup>124</sup>

For all its complexity, then, eco-criticism remains focused on the transaction between humankind and its environment, between culture and nature. To do so, it draws on the science of ecology, the better to understand the environment as an independent and autonomous entity, and on environmental ethics, to provide a philosophically informed basis for our treatment of it. Together, they provide the analytical tools with which to explore and examine the way in which we represent the environment in forms as diverse as poem or television commercial and through tropes like pollution or genres like pastoral, and how we in consequence treat and shape the environment that in turn shapes us.

These general principles notwithstanding, eco-criticism is, as I have suggested, a divided and disparate field that reflects the breadth of environmentalist opinion, from light to dark green, and from shallow environmentalism to deep ecology. It is therefore essential that I set out my own position in relation to the broad spectrum of contemporary environmentalism. That is the aim of the fourth and final section of this chapter.

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<sup>124</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.64.

## Provisional Activism: An Eco-critical Approach to the Poetry of Thomas Hardy

In simple terms, my own approach to Hardy's verse is broadly aligned with Deep Ecology, but not (as I hope I have shown) uncritically: indeed, it is part of the purpose of this thesis to examine and test Deep Ecology's assumptions. This notwithstanding, the thesis is intended to be pragmatic and post-political, eschewing the politics of left and right, whilst questioning the belief in growth and progress on which both traditional positions depend. It is post-modern, insofar as it is a critique of modernity and of the great Enlightenment programmes of modernisation, whether Marxist or liberal, but it nonetheless differentiates 'between "deconstructive postmodernism", which fosters "a nihilistic disintegration of all values" and "ecological or reconstructive postmodernism", which seeks opportunities for creativity and growth'.<sup>125</sup>

Like Deep Ecology, the thesis is based on the principle of biocentric equality, rather than ethical extensionism, and on the belief that we have an urgent obligation to an environment whose worth does not depend on its usefulness to us: inherent worth (or intrinsic value) overrides instrumental value. It considers environmental crisis a reality, and a reality that can only be understood in terms of both its material causes, and the metaphysical worldview that underpins it. Crisis is as much a consequence of science, reason, and religion as it is the result of population growth, affluence, technology, or any of the other elements that may be grouped collectively beneath the banner of 'industrialisation'. We cannot (for example) combat climate change if we fail

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<sup>125</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.7.

to grasp the significance of this fact. As Rupert Hildyard (2009) remarks, 'global warming is now above all a cultural problem':

The science of human impact on the environment and even the technicalities of possible remedial action are now well known. It is increasingly evident that the huge challenges posed by our predicament are no longer really scientific or technical but cultural and political in character.<sup>126</sup>

But crisis is also a reality underwritten by our failure, not to speak about, but to 'speak for nature', and I therefore side with Simon Estok (2009) in offering what may at times seem a discomfiting activism that is clearly intent on changing attitudes.<sup>127</sup> Can literature, asked Birkerts in the very early days of eco-criticism, 'serve as an agency of awareness?'<sup>128</sup> As an eco-critic, I answer an emphatic 'yes'.

This notwithstanding, I am acutely aware that eco-criticism is increasingly characterised by a degree of tentativeness and uncertainty – the 'provisionality' of this section's title – and it is reflected in the fact that, as Gifford (2008) candidly notes, eco-criticism has yet to develop a methodology.<sup>129</sup> Against this background of uncertainty – even anxiety – about what eco-criticism is or should mean, it should be emphasised that there is no intention of forcing Hardy to fit a predetermined mould, whether by constructing a 'green' version of his work, or by criticising his poetry for its lack of environmental prescience. It is just as likely that Hardy's idiosyncratic imagination will

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<sup>126</sup> Rupert Hildyard, 'Editorial', *Green Letters*, 10 (2009), p.4.

<sup>127</sup> *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, p.4, Estok, p.86.

<sup>128</sup> Birkerts, p.5.

<sup>129</sup> Estok, p.85, Gifford, 'Recent Critiques of Ecocriticism', *New Formations*, 15-24 (p.15).

test my own environmental principles and my own understanding of what eco-criticism is. In this respect, this thesis is less an 'analysis' of Hardy's verse than a dialogue with it (hence the more cautious choice of the word 'approach' in its title). Nevertheless, the thesis reflects a deep-seated belief that we are not independent of but constituted by an environment whose processes and cycles are more enduring than we are and of which we form merely a part. The focus of the thesis is therefore on the way that Hardy's verse variously describes – or disregards – the changing nature of our relationship with our environment.

Hardy's response to that changing relationship cannot, however, be seen in isolation. On the contrary, it should be set in the context of what Victorians thought of, not as the environment, but as 'Nature'. This is the subject of the next Chapter.

# Chapter 2

## The Victorian Concept of 'Nature'

### Introduction

Inevitably, Hardy's views were influenced and informed by contemporary ideas and opinions, and it is in the context of those influences that his poetic response to the natural world should be considered. The aim of this section is therefore to analyse how and in what ways an influential Victorian elite constructed its own interpretation – its own understanding – of 'the environment'.

This was not, of course, a term that was available to them. Instead, many educated Victorians talked of 'Nature'. In its capitalised form, this is one of the most pervasive, but also one of the most complex ideas in Victorian discourse. 'Nature' lay at the intersection of several different currents of thought and structures of belief, amongst them an emergent science characterised most notably by Darwin's concept of evolution by natural selection, a Christian tradition of natural theology, and the continuing influence of a diverse and dynamic cultural phenomenon called Romanticism. It was also shaped by the Victorian response to (and reaction against) the twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, a response that created a market for tales of country

life that Hardy successfully supplied with novels. In the words of a contemporary, Stopford A. Brooke (1832-1916):

“The love of Nature,” the meaning of which term we understand without explanation, has reached its greatest and most various development in the nineteenth century.<sup>130</sup>

If we are to understand the context in which Hardy thought and wrote, the next step is to engage with this profoundly important but difficult concept.

Five sections follow this introduction. The first section introduces the idea of ‘Nature’, and discusses the differing ways in which it can be defined. The following sections deal with particular influences – Romantic, scientific, Christian – on Victorian interpretations of ‘Nature’. The fifth and final section considers the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation on Victorian views, and notes the rise of a ‘literature of the land’ to which Hardy’s novels were to make a major contribution, and which forms the focus of the next Chapter.

### **Definitions of ‘Nature’**

As Soper remarks, ‘Nature’ is an ‘uncontainable topic’, and it generates multiple meanings.<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, definitions of ‘Nature’ can be broken down into two broad

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<sup>130</sup> Stopford A. Brooke, *Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life*, 4th edn (London: Ibister, 1898), p.446.

<sup>131</sup> Soper, p.viii.

groups of meaning, the first descriptive, the second normative, implying judgement. Within the first, descriptive group, nature can, for example, mean the 'essential quality and character of something'.<sup>132</sup> It was from the search for a *universal* quality or character that nature developed its meaning as the 'essential inherent force' at work within the world.<sup>133</sup> This force can be active and dynamic, or passive and static, and the opposition is encapsulated in two Latin phrases that form part of the classical inheritance bequeathed to the Victorians: *natura naturans* ('nature naturing') and *natura naturata* ('nature natured').

*Natura naturans*, the creative physical power, was often personified as 'the Great Mother'. Darwin retained this idea in *The Origin of Species*, personifying Nature as female, and A. H. Clough made it the subject of an eponymous poem (1846). Tennyson's 'Nature red in tooth and claw' (from *In Memoriam*, 1850) is simply another and bleaker derivation, whose impact depended on the widespread assumption that nature was in some way benign.

By contrast, the static *natura naturata* implies that Nature has been frozen 'for dissection and scientific investigation'.<sup>134</sup> This was a view from which Wordsworth recoiled when, in 'The Tables Turned' (1798), he wrote 'We murder to dissect.'<sup>135</sup> In the sense of a 'multiplicity of things or creatures', *natura naturata* might also and most obviously describe the world or cosmos entire.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.219.

<sup>133</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.220.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen Prickett, 'Romantic Literature', in *The Romantics*, ed. by Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.202-261 (p.210).

<sup>135</sup> 'The Tables Turned', l.28, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, repr. 1996) p.236.

<sup>136</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.219.



Here, *natura naturata* overlaps with a further meaning of the word 'Nature', which defines it in opposition to the supernatural. In the context of late 19th century beliefs, this opposition is reflected in the terms 'Monism' and 'Dualism', terms with which Hardy was thoroughly familiar and about which he was later to write a poem, 'Our Old Friend Dualism' (CP881). In the words of Ernst Haeckel, Monism is bound up with 'mechanical and realistic theories', and Dualism with 'teleological and idealistic dogmas':

Dualism, in the widest sense, breaks up the universe into two entirely distinct substances – the material world and an immaterial God, who is represented to be its creator, sustainer, and ruler. Monism, on the contrary (likewise taken in its widest sense), recognises one sole substance in the universe, which is at once "God and Nature"; body and spirit (or matter and energy) it holds to be inseparable.<sup>137</sup>

Thus, the Dualist's material world (as opposed to immaterial God) is equivalent to *natura naturata*, the Monist's fusion of matter and energy with *natura naturans*.

The first of 'Nature's' group of meanings is broadly descriptive; by contrast, the second was often invoked to imply judgment, to contrast, say, 'a state of nature' with the state of human society.<sup>138</sup> This tendency to compare one with the other originates with the Enlightenment, but is central to Romanticism. It is in turn central to the Victorians, on whom Romanticism continued to exercise a powerful influence: pervasive and

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<sup>137</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe*, The Thinker's Library (London: Watts, 1929), p.16.

<sup>138</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.223.

persistent, 'it is questionable whether the nineteenth century ever witnessed its complete demise'.<sup>139</sup>

## The Romantic Influence

Tracing the influence on Romanticism is, in fact, a difficult matter. It might seem obvious that the Romantics bequeathed the Victorians their love of Nature, but the pleasure they took in it was not new. The Romantics were anticipated in their different ways by classical poets like Theocritus, Virgil, and Horace, by Chaucer, by Milton, and by an array of eighteenth-century writers, in particular James Thomson and William Cowper. Nonetheless, a common and distinctive 'feat' of the Romantics was 'to read meanings into the landscape'.<sup>140</sup> 'No longer is the external world a source of pleasure', notes Watson: 'it is a moral force, a source of inspiration, a support in time of trouble, a blessing and a joy.'<sup>141</sup> As Wordsworth put it in 'The Tables Turned' (1798):

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture* (London: John Murray, 1997), p.7.

<sup>140</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery', in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by M. H. Abrams (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp.25-36 (p.31).

<sup>141</sup> J. R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830*, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1985, repr. 1988), p.51.

<sup>142</sup> 'The Tables Turned' (1798), ll.21-24, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.236.

According to Beach, the roots of this relationship lie deep in a fusion of scientific thought and religious belief that combined 'regular and universal laws' with the notion 'of divine providence'.<sup>143</sup> Those who believed in this synthesis were more likely to be deists or pantheists than theists, and more freethinking than dogmatic in outlook; they tended to conceive of God not as transcendent but as immanent in the universe, a view Haeckel would have conceived of as Monist.<sup>144</sup> Emphasis varied, but the crux of this substitute religion was a belief in a purposive and benign universe: Nature was now defined as 'somehow "good"', and good because distinct from human society and its structures.<sup>145</sup> Its meaning had been shifted from the descriptive to the normative, and from the first group of meanings set out above, to the second, a shift that depended on the (re)definition of Nature as 'everything which is not human'.<sup>146</sup>

Today, this is what Soper considers 'its commonest and most fundamental sense'.<sup>147</sup> For the eco-critic, it is an important development. As Bate notes in a pivotal work of eco-criticism, *The Song of the Earth*:

The paradox of man and the dilemma of environmentalism are here in a nutshell. The definition begins with 'nature' as the immediate cause of the entire material world, of all phenomena including humankind, but it ends with an opposition

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<sup>143</sup> Beach, p.5.

<sup>144</sup> Beach, p.4.

<sup>145</sup> Beach, p.5.

<sup>146</sup> Soper, p.15.

<sup>147</sup> Soper, p.15.

between 'nature' and 'humans or human creations or civilization'. We are both a part of and apart from nature.<sup>148</sup>

But whilst Romanticism undoubtedly influenced Victorian views of 'Nature', there are several reasons why what Parham calls a 'Victorian ecology' might stand 'in an obvious, critical relation' to its Romantic precursor.<sup>149</sup> Perhaps the most important relates to Wordsworth's insistent belief in nature's sanctity. For some, his assumption amounted to presumption: striving after transcendence, Coleridge himself had no time with this 'confusion of God with the world' and its 'accompanying nature-worship'.<sup>150</sup> For others, the difficulty was that they could no more see the sacred in the world than they could see the sacred beyond it: for a growing number of thoughtful Victorians, doubt had begun to undermine religious belief and, insofar as 'Nature' was interpreted in quasi-religious terms, it too was affected.

This mood of scepticism was in part underpinned by the discoveries of nineteenth-century scientists, discoveries which were to have an equally important effect on Victorian views of 'Nature'.

### **The Influence of Science**

As T. H. Huxley remarked in the introduction to the very first edition of *Nature* magazine in 1860, the progress of science was 'the progress of that fashioning by

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<sup>148</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.33.

<sup>149</sup> John Parham, 'Was there a Victorian Ecology?', in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.156-171 (p.156).

<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p.92.

Nature of a picture of herself, in the mind of man'.<sup>151</sup> Findings in astronomy and geology opened up what Edward FitzGerald called 'infinitudes of Space and Time', immense and immeasurable, whilst studies in evolutionary biology and later, anthropology, added a further and, to some, frightening dimension.<sup>152</sup> 'Was the World made for Man?', Mark Twain asked in an essay of 1903, but the answer was by then anything but reassuring.<sup>153</sup>

These are the terms in which we should approach the achievements of Charles Darwin, 'the century's most influential interpreter of "Nature"'.<sup>154</sup> He is best known as the author of *The Origin of Species*, a closely argued case for evolution whose continuing importance it is difficult to overstate. The theory of evolution was not, of course, new. It had been variously articulated by Empedocles, Erasmus Darwin, and Lamarck, and it had recently been reworked by Robert Chambers in his anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), 'the first attempt to connect the natural sciences into a history of creation'.<sup>155</sup> In one respect, however, Darwin's version of the theory was entirely original. Darwin chose to apply 'the doctrine of Malthus' to 'the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms':

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<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Trevor H. Levere, 'The Rich Economy of Nature: Chemistry in the Nineteenth Century', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), pp.189-200 (p.195).

<sup>152</sup> Letter to E. B. Cowell, 24 June 1847, in *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald: Volume 1 1830 – 1850*, ed. by Alfred McKinley Terhume and Annabelle Burdick Terhume, 4 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), I, p.566.

<sup>153</sup> 'Man has been here 32,000 years. That it took a hundred million years to prepare the world for him is proof that that is what it was done for. I suppose it is. I dunno.' Mark Twain, 'Was the World Made for Man?', in *The Works of Mark Twain: What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Paul Baender, 20 vols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), XIX, pp.101-106 (p.106).

<sup>154</sup> *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, p.xvii.

<sup>155</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-90*, Longman Literature in English Series (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p.123.

Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life.<sup>156</sup>

In that struggle for existence, 'natural selection' picked out 'with unerring skill' the improvement introduced by random variation; and the concept of 'natural selection' was Darwin's distinctive and original contribution to the theory of evolution.<sup>157</sup> It was the mechanism by which species evolved. By extension, and although Darwin was at this stage careful to avoid saying so, this was also how humankind had evolved. In consequence, there was no need for a Creation, and no need for a God, except, perhaps as a distant First Cause.

For the more militant and self-confident of nineteenth-century scientists, the theory of evolution completed their picture of the universe as a closed and now comprehensible system, and established their authority as its interpreters. When the eugenicist Francis Galton let slip his hope for 'the establishment of a sort of scientific priesthood throughout the kingdom' (1874), he did so because he was confident that there were no more secrets for science to unlock.<sup>158</sup> Three theories together composed 'a sufficient explanation of life on earth': 'evolution, usually in Spencer's Lamarckian formulation; atomic energy in Dalton's "solid-ball" form; and the law of the conservation of energy, the First Law of Thermodynamics, which held that the amount of energy in

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<sup>156</sup> Darwin, p.117.

<sup>157</sup> Darwin, p.219.

<sup>158</sup> Francis Galton, *English Men of Science*, 2nd edn (London: Frank Cass, 1970), p.260.

the universe remains constant'.<sup>159</sup> This was 'scientific naturalism', as Turner calls it, and there was no need for – indeed, no possibility of – any other explanation: it offered 'a complete "scientific" world-view to rival and supplant the world-view of Christianity'.<sup>160</sup> It also reduced a once mysterious universe to what Carlyle had already (and famously) described as a 'huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine', void 'of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility'.<sup>161</sup> 'And the most withering thought', Joseph Conrad added in 1897, 'is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart.'<sup>162</sup>

For those Victorians whose views were, for example, still overshadowed by the Romantic legacy, this was deeply troubling. As Beach notes, the importance of the Romantic cult of nature lay in the way it provided a bridge 'from faith to unfaith', and from supernatural to natural, but the degree to which nature was 'worthy of the enthusiasm of its devotees' remained a function of the extent to which it embodied the 'spiritual principle' that was God.<sup>163</sup> In crude corollary, there could be no love for a Godless universe. Even accepting Bate's point that Wordsworth's was an 'intensely immanent religion', the sanctity of nature was difficult to square with the scientific depiction of it as blank or indifferent or worse, actively hostile to human efforts.<sup>164</sup> Evolution did nothing for the idea of man as 'the child of nature': 'it was of small

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<sup>159</sup> Gilmour, p.135.

<sup>160</sup> See Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Tess Cosslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.10.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, with an introduction by Ernest Rhys (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p.150; originally published serially 1833-4.

<sup>162</sup> Letter of 20 December, 1897, in *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. by C. T. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.56.

<sup>163</sup> Beach, p.5, p.6.

<sup>164</sup> Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p.34.

advantage to derive man's spirit from nature if she was to be regarded herself as inhumanly cruel and immoral'.<sup>165</sup>

Partly in response, eminent Victorians like Matthew Arnold and Tennyson distanced themselves from Romantic conceptions. Arnold's 'feeling for Nature', complained Quiller-Couch, 'has not the Wordsworthian depth'.<sup>166</sup> There is 'no warmth, no life, no love in his Nature', wrote Brooke of Tennyson, and this was also Wordsworth's own opinion: after meeting him, Wordsworth 'could not refrain from observing how little sympathy he thought Tennyson had with "what I should myself most value in my attempts, viz the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material Universe, and the moral relation under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances"'.<sup>167</sup>

Yet what has been called 'Natural Supernaturalism' (that tendency to 'naturalize the supernatural') continued to exert a powerful influence on rationalists and agnostics alike.<sup>168</sup> Nor was this the only reason why Darwin's contemporaries resisted a narrowly mechanistic and materialistic view of the natural world. Their concept of 'Nature' was profoundly influenced by Christian beliefs and structures of feeling, and this is discussed in more detail below.

## The Influence of Natural Theology

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<sup>165</sup> Beach, p.7.

<sup>166</sup> A. T. Quiller-Couch, in Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840 – 1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913, repr. 1937), p.xv.

<sup>167</sup> Brooke, p.452; Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.191.

<sup>168</sup> The phrase is from *Sartor Resartus*, the definition from M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Norton, 1971, repr. 1973) p.68.



Christian beliefs continued to exert a powerful influence on the way in which Victorians defined 'Nature'. Their views were particularly influenced by the case for God's existence encapsulated in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), and defiantly recapitulated in *The Bridgewater Treatises* (1833-7). The central argument of Paley's *Natural Theology* is neatly summarized by his sub-title: 'Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature':

The marks of design are too strong to be gotten over. Design must have had a designer. That designer must have been a person. That person is GOD.<sup>169</sup>

Paley's argument has its own undeniable logic, and it remained an important influence on the way in which many Victorians (scientists amongst them) viewed the natural world.<sup>170</sup> If it conspired against Darwin's attempt to convince his contemporaries of a rigidly rationalistic interpretation, it also conspired against Darwin himself. When Darwin describes how 'nature's productions' (compared to man's) bear 'the stamp of far higher workmanship', *The Origin of Species* reads like 'the last great work of Victorian natural theology' – or, perhaps, the first great work of a new natural theology that sought its

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<sup>169</sup> Quoted in Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.205).

<sup>170</sup> The scientists included such notable figures as James Prescott Joule, George Gabriel Stokes, James Clerk Maxwell, and William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, who invoked natural theology on no less an occasion than his presidential address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1871. It is appropriate to remark that two noted scientists, Peter Guthrie Tait and Balfour Stewart, later published *The Unseen Universe*, 'to show that the presumed incompatibility of Science and Religion does not exist'. Quoted in Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.206).

miracles in 'the perception of scientific law'.<sup>171</sup> As Henry Adams later remarked (1907), 'to other Darwinians – except Darwin – Natural Selection seemed a dogma to put in place of the Athanasian Creed; it was a form of religious hope; a promise of ultimate perfection'.<sup>172</sup> As Darwin himself put it in the last sentence of *The Origin of Species*:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>173</sup>

Darwin's sense of reverence suggests that the secularisation of scientific thought proceeded only slowly, if at all.<sup>174</sup> As Haeckel noted (1901):

Unfortunately, consecutive thought is a rare phenomenon in nature. The great majority of philosophers are content to grasp with the right hand the pure knowledge that is built on experience, but they will not part with the mystic faith based on revelation, to which they cling with the left.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Darwin, p.133; John Durant, 'Darwinism and Divinity: A Century of Debate', in *Darwinism and Divinity*, ed. by John Durant (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp.9-39 (p.16); Gilmour, p.132.

<sup>172</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), p.231.

<sup>173</sup> Darwin, p.459-460.

<sup>174</sup> See Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215.

<sup>175</sup> Haeckel, p.311.

Unremarked by Haeckel, however, scientific naturalism and natural theology were connected by a shared belief that 'theories could express actual truths about an external Nature that existed independently of man and possessed a structure and reality of its own'.<sup>176</sup> Arguably, both fall within what might be described as the tradition of 'Victorian realism', and both were therefore vulnerable to the growing realisation that the solid basis of empirical argument was itself being undermined.<sup>177</sup> 'Molecular science', wrote James Clerk Maxwell in *Nature* in 1873, 'teaches us that our experiments can never give us anything more than statistical information, and that no law deduced from them can pretend to absolute precision'.<sup>178</sup> 'Our hypotheses are in terms of ourselves rather than in terms of Nature itself', J. H. Poynting remarked in 1899.<sup>179</sup> Five years later, Horace Lamb contrasted this new and more modest view with the confident certainties of mid-century, when the universe was seen as a mechanism 'whose most intimate details' might one day be guessed: 'we no longer hope by levers and screws to pluck out the heart of the mystery of the universe', he declared; 'what were once called laws of Nature' are now 'simply rules by which we can tell more or less accurately what will be the consequences of a given state of things'.<sup>180</sup>

Even before revolutionary developments in quantum mechanics swept aside classical physics, the scientific world picture was increasingly composed of overlapping

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<sup>176</sup> Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.213).

<sup>177</sup> See Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.207).

<sup>178</sup> Gilmour, p.138.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in David B. Wilson, 'Concepts of Physical Nature: John Herschel to Karl Pearson', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.213).

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.214).

and often contradictory explanations.<sup>181</sup> Once again, however, a certain, innate conservatism revealed itself. Amongst scientists, there was a tendency to cling to a broadly realistic belief in an intelligible universe. (Today, the dream of a general 'theory of everything' – the phrase is Stephen Hawking's – continues to exert a powerful appeal.)<sup>182</sup> For many, the concept of 'Nature' continued to be shaped by a belief in objective truths, absolute certainties, and the 'army of unalterable law' (l.14) that Meredith so brilliantly imagined in the poem 'Lucifer in Starlight' (1883).<sup>183</sup>

Yet it is also clear that many of those same Victorians were equally reluctant to abandon a belief in 'Nature's' spiritual, symbolic, or sacramental dimension, whether that belief derived from the Romantic legacy or still dominant Christian structures of feeling. Even Haeckel was at pains to point out that his Monism was not identical with materialism, which (as he memorably explained) 'denies the existence of the spirit, and dissolves the world into a heap of dead atoms'.<sup>184</sup> For many Victorians, then, 'Nature' remained 'above all a repository of feeling, a sanctuary they were eager to retain'.<sup>185</sup>

The meaning of 'Nature' nonetheless underwent one final change, prompted in large part by the impact of industrialization and urbanization, and this is discussed in the next and final section.

## The Impact of Industrialization and Urbanization

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<sup>181</sup> See, for example, John D. Barrow, *Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.55.

<sup>182</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914 – 1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.541.

<sup>183</sup> *Selected Poetical Works of George Meredith*, ed. by G. M. Trevelyan (London: Longmans, 1955), p.38.

<sup>184</sup> Haeckel, p.16.

<sup>185</sup> *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, p.xxi.

We have already seen how Romanticism influenced a shift in meaning from 'nature' as the origin of all life, including humankind, to 'Nature', meaning life opposed to human society and its structures.<sup>186</sup> Now, through another tiny but equally important shift, 'Nature' came to mean the countryside ('the sign of nature') as opposed to the city ('the sign of civilization').<sup>187</sup> The spur for this shift was the transformation wrought by urbanization and industrialization. 'Every age may be called an age of transition', wrote Edward Bulwer Lytton in 1833, 'but in our age the transition is *visible*'.<sup>188</sup> That transition was not only visible, but total, and sudden: this was the 'shock of the new', as for the first time in human history a predominantly rural and patrician society rooted in agriculture was superseded by an urban and suburban one based on industry and mechanisation and linked to a world-wide network of finance and trade.<sup>189</sup> And if the pace of life was transformed, so was the Victorian experience of *place*. In 1801, 66% of the population of England and Wales lived in the countryside; by the time of the census of 1871, the same proportion lived in cities.<sup>190</sup> By 1891, only 25% of the population lived outside settlements of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants.<sup>191</sup> Sometime in the 1840s, in short, a rural became an urban society.

It was, however, a change from which many Victorians recoiled. As Pierson remarks, 'one of the striking features of the Victorians, engaged in developing the first

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<sup>186</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.33.

<sup>187</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.3.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Newsome, p.1.

<sup>189</sup> See Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, 2nd edn (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), pp.9-15.

<sup>190</sup> K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886*, *The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.12.

<sup>191</sup> Hoppen, p.12.

predominantly urban society, was the reluctance of many of them to accept the outcome of their own energies'.<sup>192</sup> The urban 'in particular was found wanting'.<sup>193</sup> For the affluent, the result was what Raymond Williams called the 'flight from the cities': between 1901 and 1911, for example, 'the trend of rural depopulation was actually reversed in Surrey, Kent, Sussex, and Hampshire'.<sup>194</sup> But the effect was as much psychological as practical. Faced with the ugly realities of the modern, industrial conurbation, writers shrank from the challenge of depicting it. Notwithstanding a slew of mid-Victorian 'industrial' novels, amongst them *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Alton Locke*, *Hard Times*, and *Felix Holt*, 'the actual details of industrial work were rarely described in contemporary novels'.<sup>195</sup> Even in these industrial novels 'sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal'.<sup>196</sup> In the case of nineteenth-century poetry, however, the pattern is less one of engagement and withdrawal than of outright rejection. Perhaps, as Clayre suggests, their love of 'Nature' led poets to condemn industrialisation and industrial cities out of hand: 'it sometimes seems that the nineteenth-century poets were ready in advance with complaints about industry before the darkest industry had come to blacken the landscape, and against urbanisation even before the vast cities of the later nineteenth century had grown'.<sup>197</sup> And whilst that love

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<sup>192</sup> Stanley Pierson, 'The Way Out', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), II, pp.873-889 (p.873).

<sup>193</sup> Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A social history of the countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.25.

<sup>194</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.256; Lynne Walker, 'Architecture and Design', in *The Edwardian Era*, ed. by Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry (London: Phaidon Press and Barbican Art Gallery, 1987), pp.117-151 (p.124).

<sup>195</sup> Hoppen, p.414.

<sup>196</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958, repr. 1959), p.109.

<sup>197</sup> *Nature and Industrialization*, ed. by Alasdair Clayre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.xxi, p.xxviii-xxix.

of Nature was in part a Romantic legacy, the Romantic poets also bequeathed an audience whose taste set the limits on what poets said and how they were to say it.<sup>198</sup> The Victorian public expected elevated thoughts couched in an elevated language: the 'democratic flux and utilitarian ugliness of the modern city' might have suited the Victorian press, note Messenger and Watson, but they were 'inimical to traditional poetic subjects and language'.<sup>199</sup>

Instead, a growing number of Victorians invested their emotional and imaginative energy in an idealized vision of the countryside and of country ways of life, seeking certainties in a (largely illusory) image of rural stability. In the words of Raymond Williams, a 'triumphant urban and industrial economy' sought to remake the countryside 'in its own compensating image'.<sup>200</sup>

The effect of this emotional and imaginative investment was not, however, confined to a shift in the meaning of 'Nature'. It also affected the Victorian taste in the arts. Increasingly, romanticized images of England as rural idyll were opposed to the reality of blast-furnace and factory. Small fortunes were made by those artists with an eye for prettified country scenes.<sup>201</sup> And as Wiener remarks (and Searle corroborates),

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<sup>198</sup> *Victorian Poetry: 'The City of Dreadful Night' and Other Poems*, ed. by N. P. Messenger and J. R. Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p.x.

<sup>199</sup> *Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Messenger and Watson, p.xi.

<sup>200</sup> Raymond Williams, quoted in Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850 – 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.51. In a later, linked development, the countryside came to be identified with the nation's sense of self: all the virtues of the national character were said to be rooted in rural values and traditions. As Baldwin famously remarked in 1924, 'to me, England is the country, and the country is England'; quoted by Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. by Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp.62-88 (p.82).

<sup>201</sup> Painters like Alfred Munnings, Myles Birket Foster and Helen Allingham, and photographers like P. H. Emerson and Gertrude Jekyll, enjoyed 'enormous popularity' (re)creating these kinds of rural idyll. On his death in 1899, for example, Foster left £30,000, a substantial sum that accurately reflects the commercial success of this now forgotten group of artists; Andrew Clayton-Payne, *Victorian Cottages* (London: Cassell, 2002), p.143.

there was a 'striking increase in the number and popularity of novels, poems, and essays on country subjects in the last years of the century'.<sup>202</sup> Newer media such as the guide-book also showed a marked preference for lyrical and picturesque descriptions of rural life and labour.<sup>203</sup> Wiener dates this literary outbreak of rural nostalgia to the 1880s. In *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900-1939*, Cavaliero takes as his starting point the novels of Thomas Hardy, first published in the 1870s.<sup>204</sup> Both, however, agree that Hardy made an important, perhaps pre-eminent, contribution to the literature of this 'pastoral retreatism', this 'literature of the land'.<sup>205</sup> Properly, the next major step is to assess that literature, and Hardy's involvement in it. That is the aim of Chapter 3.

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<sup>202</sup> Wiener, p.50. See also G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p.606.

<sup>203</sup> Howkins, 'The Rural World and its Representation', in *The Edwardian Era*, ed. by Beckett and Cherry, pp.139-147 (p.141).

<sup>204</sup> See Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>205</sup> Wiener, p.52.



# Chapter 3

## The Novels of Thomas Hardy

### Introduction

Chapter 3 focuses on Hardy's novels. Published between 1871 and 1897, the novels generally predate and certainly influence Hardy's verse, the first collection of which was not published until 1898. Analysing this aspect of Hardy's work is therefore a necessary and important introduction to the Chapters on poetry that follow.

This Chapter has six sections. The first, 'A Problematic Pastoral', sets Hardy's novels in the context of a late nineteenth-century 'literature of the land'. This kind of literature has been criticised for idealising the country life it describes, a criticism that also extends to Hardy's depiction of 'Wessex'. To the extent that it represents a deeply felt reaction to a growing process of urbanisation and industrialisation, however, it may be read very differently. This is the aim of the next section, 'Re-evaluating the Literature of the Land', which brings an eco-critical perspective to bear on the work of Hardy's contemporaries, then extends the discussion to Hardy's own writings. The third and fourth sections of the Chapter evaluate, respectively, *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, two of Hardy's most important novels, whilst the fifth section, "'Wessex' Revisited' returns to and reconsiders the world of Hardy's novels from an eco-critical

perspective. The Chapter's final section, "In a Wood", marks the transition from novels to poetry by analysing a poem whose argument is drawn from and overlaps with Hardy's fiction.

## A Problematic Pastoral

As I noted in my earlier discussion of the Victorian concept of 'Nature', a 'deep vein of rural nostalgia' ran through the art and literature of the period.<sup>206</sup> This nostalgia encouraged the tendency to ignore the obvious and (in the age of train and later motor car) increasing interpenetration of city and countryside, or what cultural geographers today call 'the rural-urban continuum', and instead insist on sharply separating the two, tending to see nothing but vice in the former and virtue in the latter.<sup>207</sup> Searle calls it 'pastoralism', but for the eco-critic, this tendency to seek solace in an idealised vision of rural life is as problematic as it is influential.<sup>208</sup> In perpetuating the myth of a 'green and pleasant land', it also creates an 'anti-urban bias' that continues to affect 'traditional models of environmentalism'.<sup>209</sup> It may affect eco-criticism itself, within which, as

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<sup>206</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p.46.

<sup>207</sup> 'The division between urban and rural populations is necessarily arbitrary': *United Nations Demographic Yearbook*, quoted in Michael Hill, *Rural Settlement and the Urban Impact on the Countryside* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p.2.

<sup>208</sup> Garrard, p.32.

<sup>209</sup> 'For much of the modern past, the "imagined community" of England has been rural'; Barry Reay, *Rural England: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.9; James W. Shepherd, 'The Paradox of Urban Environmentalism: Problem and Possibility', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 9.3 (2006), 299-315 (p.299).

Parham points out, a great many urban environmental issues are 'notable only by their absence'.<sup>210</sup>

The relevance to this thesis is, of course, that Hardy's novels played an important part in the late-century 'literature of the land' to which this 'rural nostalgia' gave rise. Indeed, Hardy is invariably cited in as a key influence, along with Richard Jefferies (1848-1887).<sup>211</sup> In their respective fields – the one best known as a novelist, the other as an essayist – the two appear pre-eminent. In a chapter on 'The Pastoral Vision', for example, Drabble describes Hardy as 'perhaps the greatest writer of rural life and landscape in the language'; Squires calls Hardy the 'king of the pastoral'; Denys Thompson and Cavaliero remark his influence on the twentieth-century rural tradition; and later writers, like John Cowper Powys, freely acknowledge a debt to his work.<sup>212</sup>

However, neither Hardy nor Jefferies was writing in isolation. Contemporaries include William Morris and A. E. Housman, and a number of less well-known writers, amongst them William Howitt and Margaret Woods, whose numerous, now forgotten novels include Howitt's *The Man of the People* (1860) and *Woodburn Grange* (1867), and Woods' *The Vagabonds* (1894), *Weeping Ferry* (1898), and *A Village Tragedy* (1887). Furthermore, Jefferies and Hardy were only a part of a distinguished nineteenth-

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<sup>210</sup> *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.xv.

<sup>211</sup> See J. A. V. Chapple, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920* (London: Blandford, 1970); Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Michael Squires, *The Pastoral Novel: Studies in George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1974, repr. 1975); W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: A Study of the Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Margaret Drabble, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979); David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Williams, *The Country and the City*, and Gifford, *Pastoral* (both previously cited).

<sup>212</sup> Drabble, p.91, Squires, p.125, Denys Thompson, 'The Rural Tradition', in *From James to Eliot*, ed. by Boris Ford, *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, rev. edn. (London: Penguin, 1983, repr. 1988), VII, pp.180-195, Cavaliero, pp.1-6, John Cowper Powys, *The Pleasures of Literature* (London: Cassell, 1938), pp.605-623.

century rural tradition. They were anticipated by an array of essayists and novelists, amongst them Mary Russell Mitford, William Cobbett, George Borrow, and Charles Kingsley, and, more famously, Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot. And if Jefferies and Hardy were not the first to tackle rural themes, they were certainly not the last. The tradition of rural commentators was if anything growing: rural writing became markedly more, not less, popular after the turn of the century.<sup>213</sup>

Although the diversity of rural writers makes it difficult to generalise, critics tend to share the view that this rural tradition is characterised by a pastoralism that, like Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), offered its readers an escapist evocation of 'blue remembered hills' and a 'land of lost content'.<sup>214</sup> This quality may explain its popularity with a newly educated but now city-bound readership. As Gifford remarks, 'there can be no doubt that, for the largely urban readers of these representations of English countryside', the work of these writers 'acted as a form of pastoral escape from their

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<sup>213</sup> See Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.72. The scale of this early twentieth century fascination with life on the land should not be underestimated. Denys Thompson includes Hardy, and nods in the direction of E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence, but goes on to list W. H. Hudson, George Sturt (*The Bettesworth Book*, 1901, *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer*, 1907, *Change in the Village*, 1912, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, 1923), and Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* trilogy (1939-43, collected for the first time in 1945), and adds John Cowper Powys (*Wolf Solent*, 1929, *The Meaning of Culture*, 1930), Theodore Francis Powys (*Mark Only*, 1924, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, 1927), H. J. Massingham (*Downland Man*, 1926), and Adrian Bell, whose popular novel *Corduroy* (1930) was the first of a trilogy; see 'The Rural Tradition', pp.180-195. By contrast, Glen Cavaliero (previously cited) concentrates on minor novelists working between 1900 and 1940; he includes Henry Williamson, T. F. and Llewelyn Powys, H. E. Bates, Winifred Holtby, Francis Brett Young, Constance Holme, who published eight novels between 1913 and 1930, and Mary Webb, whose five novels were published between 1915 and 1925. Cavaliero also includes 'farmer novelists' like Bell (see above), H. W. Freeman (*Down in the Valley*, 1930), and A. G. Street (*Farmer's Glory*, 1932). Finally, Cavaliero also notes that, in the tradition of Richard Jefferies' *Bevis* (1882), there are a number of children's books that focus on life in the country, such as Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (a series whose first instalment was published in 1929). Long as it may be, this list is not complete. Both Williams, in *The Country and the City*, and Gifford, in *Pastoral*, include the Georgian poets and Edward Thomas.

<sup>214</sup> A. E. Housman, 'A Shropshire Lad', XL, l.3, l.5, in *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939, repr. 1949), p.58.

own urbanised realities'.<sup>215</sup> This is where the critical difficulty lies: as Gifford explains, the pastoral genre has grown from its classical origins into 'any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban', and then into a form of literature that, steeped in nostalgia for an imagined golden age, sentimentalises the landscape whilst idealising relationships within rural society.<sup>216</sup> This version of the genre persistently ignores the systematic exploitation of the disadvantaged and the disempowered, just as it overlooks a similarly exploitative relationship to the environment. Amongst critics, eco-critics included, the term 'pastoral' has therefore tended to acquire a pejorative connotation, denoting a discourse disposed 'to distort or mystify social and environmental history'.<sup>217</sup>

For Chapple, this tendency to distort and mystify is an undeniable and unfortunate feature of the kind of writing we have been discussing: reading even 'the better rural literature of the period is often disheartening'.<sup>218</sup> He is particularly critical of the Georgians, a loose alliance of like-minded poets whose work was published in five anthologies between 1912 and 1922, and whose 'disastrous decline' led them to be derisively characterised as 'weekend poets'.<sup>219</sup> Nor is Chapple alone in identifying Georgian poetry as the kind of literature that 'later generations were to dismiss as imperialist or escapist, nostalgic or wearily imitative'.<sup>220</sup> According to Gervais, Rupert Brooke's Grantchester would have seemed like a 'fantasy to any farm worker', whilst Drabble talks of 'third-rate, unfelt pastoral fantasy' and Gifford of the Georgians' 'explicit

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<sup>215</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.74.

<sup>216</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.2.

<sup>217</sup> Garrard, p.39.

<sup>218</sup> Chapple, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920*, p.93.

<sup>219</sup> Chapple, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920*, p.88, p.89.

<sup>220</sup> Drabble, p.258.

escapism', adding that 'the contemporary sense of pastoral as a pejorative term' perhaps resides in their 'lasting effect upon English culture'.<sup>221</sup>

Views such as these may explain why, as Cavaliero remarks, most of the writers who succeeded Hardy have 'been neglected by academic criticism'.<sup>222</sup> The work of Mary Webb is an obvious example. After her death in 1927, her novels were immediately 'installed as classics of the rural school'; *Precious Bane* (1924), for example, was reprinted seventeen times by the end of the decade, and a further thirty-five in the following.<sup>223</sup> Indeed, *Precious Bane* attracted a laudatory introductory note (1928) by the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin ('the stupid urban view of the countryside as dull receives a fresh and crushing answer in the books of Mary Webb'), but it did nothing to ensure lasting literary fame.<sup>224</sup> If Webb's name is now known, it is because of Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), a satire that bears the same all-conquering relationship to rural romances as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* does to the Gothic novel. In Drabble's opinion, 'it is hardly possible, now, to write a pastoral without a degree of self-consciousness that invokes satiric laughter'.<sup>225</sup>

Yet critics have also argued that this 'decline' – this development of a supposedly degenerate pastoral – was in evidence well before the Georgians declared their intention to "stand and stare" from a gate, their minds largely disengaged'.<sup>226</sup> Gifford describes Mitford's sketches of village life as 'anodyne', whilst Drabble notes that Gaskell and Eliot look back 'with varying degrees of regret and nostalgia', and Reay

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<sup>221</sup> Gervais, p.4, Drabble, p.258, Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.81, p.71.

<sup>222</sup> Cavaliero, p.ix.

<sup>223</sup> Cavaliero, p.133.

<sup>224</sup> Mary Webb, *Precious Bane* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924, repr. 1949), p.8.

<sup>225</sup> Drabble, p.98.

<sup>226</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.71.

adds that rural labourers are either absent from their novels or present only as caricatures.<sup>227</sup> Mellers and Hildyard describe Housman's 'pseudo-folk ballads' as 'wilfully synthetic', adding that, 'like so many other contemporary poets (Henley, Newbolt, Bridges, Hopkins, Masfield, Brooke, even early Yeats),' Housman 'seemed content to be the elegist of a vanishing rural world'.<sup>228</sup> But the greatest of these rural elegists – the 'greatest master in the old pastoral tradition', in the words of G. M. Young – was Thomas Hardy.<sup>229</sup> For Young and a number of other early critics, novels like *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) represented 'a pastoral world of antique simplicity'.<sup>230</sup> As Brown remarked, 'the clash between agricultural and urban modes of life' – between an 'old rural world and the new urban one' – is central to Hardy's great novels.<sup>231</sup> Together, they recorded what Guerard called 'the sad passing of the stable rural life, the decay of old customs and of local traditions,' and the death of that 'cheerful old England'.<sup>232</sup>

These are also the terms in which Victorians viewed Hardy, 'an artist in rustic originals', and these were the qualities that appealed to them.<sup>233</sup> Writing about *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1886, for example, the *Saturday Review* approvingly described it as 'a picturesque romance of rural life', which was no doubt the response Hardy had

<sup>227</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.133, Drabble, p.80, Reay, p.3-5.

<sup>228</sup> Wilfrid Mellers and Rupert Hildyard, 'The Edwardian Age and the Inter-War Years', in *The Edwardian Age and the Inter-War Years*, ed. by Boris Ford, *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain*, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), VIII, pp.2-45 (p.16, p.17).

<sup>229</sup> G. M. Young, 'Thomas Hardy', in *Victorian Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.183-201 (p.187).

<sup>230</sup> Squires (p.1) cites Howe (1966), Guerard (1949), Drake (1959).

<sup>231</sup> Douglas Brown, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Longmans, 1954), p.30, p.65.

<sup>232</sup> A. J. Guerard (1949), quoted in Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy*, p.xii.

<sup>233</sup> William Wallace, *Academy*, 9 April 1887, in *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* ed. by R. G. Cox (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.155.

hoped for in setting out to write what he called 'a pastoral tale'.<sup>234</sup> When in *Jude* (1895) Hardy deviated from the kind of depiction critics and readers found in other novels, amongst them *The Return of the Native* (1878), Edmund Gosse was the first to complain 'we wish he would go back to Egdon Heath and listen to the singing in the heather':

His early romances were full of calm and lovely pantheism; he seemed in them to feel the deep-hued country landscapes full of rural gods, all homely and benign.<sup>235</sup>

In fact, Gifford argues, *The Return of the Native* offers 'country clowns' to 'sophisticated urban audiences', a view endorsed by modern historians of rural labouring life such as Reay, who maintain that novels like *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Tess* all 'trivialize rural workers as simple, ignorant, clodhopping fools'.<sup>236</sup>

Thus, Hardy stands indicted for the 'pastoral distance' he introduces to his fiction.<sup>237</sup> For Gifford, a modern eco-critic whose recent work on the pastoral form underpins this discussion, that distance is inevitable and unavoidable: Hardy 'is a self-educated man writing for a literary audience caught in the tension of knowing, but not belonging to, rural culture'.<sup>238</sup> And if characters tend to caricature, environment is all too

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<sup>234</sup> Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy*, p.xi ; *LW*, p.98.

<sup>235</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Cosmopolis* (1896), in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.269.

<sup>236</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.17; Reay, p.5.

<sup>237</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.103.

<sup>238</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.103.



readily reduced to scenery, to setting. According to a leading American eco-critic, Lawrence Buell, Hardy is simply another example of a writer who demonstrates how hard it is 'to do justice to place'.<sup>239</sup>

At the heart of this problem of 'place' is Wessex, the fictional domain that frames Hardy's novels. Wessex was the name of an ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom once ruled by Alfred the Great, but the word had long since fallen into disuse when it was disinterred, first by William Barnes in 1844 and again in 1848, and then by Hardy, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.<sup>240</sup> Its appeal to readers was immediate. What Wordsworth had done for the Lakes and the Brontës for the Yorkshire moors, observed Lionel Johnson in one of the first (1894) attempts to analyse the phenomenon, Hardy had now done for Wessex, 'the land of his inventions'.<sup>241</sup>

This 'partly real, partly dream-country' (as Hardy was to call it) was centred on and roughly coincident with Dorset.<sup>242</sup> Readers were quick to chase down the clues: 'most careful readers' (wrote Johnson) 'could assign to each novel, with no great labour, its corresponding scenery and actual home'.<sup>243</sup> For those who could not, Hardy later provided a map. Wessex, Hardy came to realise, had commercial potential, and he set about exploiting it.<sup>244</sup> He retrospectively revised the novels, making substantial changes

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<sup>239</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.255.

<sup>240</sup> See Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), pp.127-128.

<sup>241</sup> Lionel Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, new edn (London: John Lane, 1895), p.255.

<sup>242</sup> Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, p.83.

<sup>243</sup> Preface (1912) to Wessex Edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Harold Orel (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p.9.

<sup>244</sup> Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, p.89.

<sup>244</sup> According to Gatrell, 'we can say with some confidence that in September or October of 1890 Hardy first formulated for himself the idea of Wessex as twentieth-century readers have been accustomed to experience it'; see Simon Gatrell, 'Wessex', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, repr. 2003), pp.19-37 (p.27).

to suggest that Wessex had been 'coherently conceived from the beginning'.<sup>245</sup> He 'advertised "Wessex" when new editions of his novels were published, and when he was choosing titles for volumes of short stories and poems', and whilst he himself did not write a guidebook to Wessex, he was happy to help his close friend Hermann Lea in doing so: Lea's *Thomas Hardy's Wessex* first appeared in 1913.<sup>246</sup>

In fact, financial security was not Hardy's only or indeed primary motive in developing 'Wessex', as I explain later in the Chapter, but Wessex undoubtedly underpinned the success of his fiction. Indeed, it quickly became an obsession with Hardy's more 'ardent admirers'; as Ruth Head remarked in 1922, they 'travelled Wessex from end to end' familiarising themselves with 'every detail of time and place'.<sup>247</sup> They continue to do so. When in 1967 the Hardy Society was founded, visitors flocked to Dorset 'on the Wessex pilgrimage'.<sup>248</sup> Screen adaptations have further increased interest. Indeed, Hardy lived long enough to see the beginnings of the trend, when in 1921 a silent version of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was filmed on location, and Hardy lent a hand with the spelling of the title cards (telling 'no one, presumably, of his habit of inventing dialect terms').<sup>249</sup> Numerous film and television adaptations have followed. As Gardiner remarks, when it comes to 'heritage' on-screen, Hardy is 'ever-reliable for idyllic pastoral settings'.<sup>250</sup>

The effect of Hardy's reinvention is easy to trace. Today, 'Wessex' has become so synonymous with the area (and the term so well known) that English Heritage

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<sup>245</sup> Patricia Ingham, in *TW*, p.vii.

<sup>246</sup> Geoffrey Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide to Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.153.

<sup>247</sup> Ruth Head, *Pages from the Works of Thomas Hardy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922), p.v.

<sup>248</sup> John Gardiner, *The Victorians: An Age in Retrospect* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), p.97.

<sup>249</sup> Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001, repr. 2002), p.33.

<sup>250</sup> Gardiner, p.97.

advertises its sites in the southwest under the banner 'Historic Wessex'. Unwitting visitors have no idea how far in the past that history lies. Sold as scenery in books and films, an imagined landscape has in effect supplanted a real one.<sup>251</sup> According to cultural geographers like Hill, it is to creations like these that we owe our 'romanticised view of a rural England that never really existed'.<sup>252</sup> Small wonder that, as Barrell and Bull remark, 'today, more than ever before, the pastoral vision simply will not do'.<sup>253</sup>

This is, however, only a partial account of the late nineteenth-century literary fascination with the countryside. It is clear that this fascination reflects the tension between a now urbanised society and its rural past: as Mellers and Hildyard remark, 'if one had baldly to explain British culture of the whole period (1901-1939) in terms of a single social development, it would have to be by reference to the transition from an essentially rural society to that of the modern city'.<sup>254</sup> Nonetheless, the interrelationship is complex and often ambiguous, particularly since the pastoral form itself 'cannot be pinned to a single ideological position'.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, rural and organic imagery provide 'almost the essential alternative myth for the era'.<sup>256</sup>

As a result, eco-critics have taken a growing interest in this 'literature of the land', perhaps because of the recognition that the pastoral may be relevant even if escapist. Whether or not such an impulse constitutes an adequate reaction to industrialisation, it represents (and to some extent remains) an obvious and legitimate psychological

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<sup>251</sup> There is even a 'Wessex Regionalist Party' intent on securing home rule for the region which, whilst it attracts little support, is nonetheless a registered political party.

<sup>252</sup> Hill, p.132.

<sup>253</sup> John Barrell and John Bull, *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p.432.

<sup>254</sup> Mellers and Hildyard, *The Edwardian Age*, ed. by Ford, pp.2-45 (p.17).

<sup>255</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.44.

<sup>256</sup> Bradbury, p.46.

response to traumatic change. 'Escapist!' exclaimed Powys in his analysis of Hardy; 'that is the whole point'.<sup>257</sup> In fact, and as Gifford himself points out, it is perfectly possible for the pastoral to act as 'a medium for a critique of the present' by exploiting the tension 'between people and nature, between retreat and return' to comment on our ambiguous response to a modern industrialized and urbanized existence.<sup>258</sup> Seen in these terms, the late Victorian pastoral impulse can be reinterpreted as part of what Gould calls a 'fecund and important period of green politics', during which 'the philosophy of industrialism, the relationship between the individual and the social and physical environment, and the functions and successes of the city received an extraordinary degree of critical examination'.<sup>259</sup> The aim of the next section is therefore to highlight a few of the ways in which a supposedly escapist 'literature of the land' can be reinterpreted and its authors re-evaluated.

### **Re-reading the Literature of the Land**

In re-evaluating this kind of literature, the work of Mary Webb provides an obvious starting point. As I have pointed out, the inter-war success of her novels is in complete contrast to their subsequent and virtually complete critical extinction. Yet contemporaries made much of her distinctive 'fusion of the elements of nature and man' ('almost any page at random will furnish an illustration of the blending of human passion with the fields and skies'), and to the eco-critic, this association of people and place

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<sup>257</sup> Powys, p.621.

<sup>258</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.15.

<sup>259</sup> Peter C. Gould, *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain 1880-1900* (Sussex: Harvester, 1988), p.viii.

make them at once interesting.<sup>260</sup> 'Nature to Mary Webb', wrote Baldwin, 'was not a pattern on the screen'.<sup>261</sup> *Precious Bane* bears out that observation, with an opening description of Sarn Mere that highlights its persistent, its irreducible strangeness:

It may be the water lapping, year in and year out – everywhere you look and listen, water; or the big trees waiting and considering on your right hand and on your left; or the unbreathing quiet of the place, as if it was created but an hour gone, and not created for us.<sup>262</sup>

In the Mere, the sky is seen as if 'in a glass darkly, and the long shadows of rushes go thin and sharp across the sliding stars, and even the sun and moon might be put out down there'.<sup>263</sup> It is other; it is a thing in itself, owing its existence to forces outside human control.

Webb's 'sub-Lawrentian prose' is close to parody, even here, but there lingers the suggestion of what Gifford elsewhere calls 'post-pastoral' intensity, and it should act as a reminder that the anthropocentric concerns of existing and traditional scholarship need not overlap with those of the eco-critic.<sup>264</sup> The complex interaction between the two, and indeed between differing eco-critical positions, is, perhaps, best demonstrated in a more extended analysis of two novels by Hardy's contemporaries, William Morris

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<sup>260</sup> Webb, p.8, p.9.

<sup>261</sup> Webb, p.9.

<sup>262</sup> Webb, p.14.

<sup>263</sup> Webb, p.16-17.

<sup>264</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.75, p.74.

and Richard Jefferies. This in turn provides the context for a more detailed review of Hardy's own supposedly 'pastoral' fiction.

The first of these novels is Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), a work that deliberately blurs the distinctions (both spatial and temporal) on which pastoral is founded, whilst at the same time highlighting the exploitation that shapes human society, and its relationship to the environment. In a future where urban, industrialised existence has collapsed, the people have fled to the countryside and succumbed 'to the influence of their surroundings'.<sup>265</sup> As 'the difference between town and country grew less and less', and the suburbs 'melted away,' so a country of 'huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm' became 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt' and (in a perfect summation of the philosophy of John Ruskin), 'all work is now pleasurable'.<sup>266</sup>

At a glance, Morris's depiction appears to correspond to the kind of 'pastoral' critics might dismiss as sentimental and idealised. However, an ideal vision of the future is not an idealised version of the present, and the novel contains a very accurate account of late-Victorian rural life:

Houses were allowed to fall into decay and actual ruin; trees were cut down for the sake of the few shillings which the poor sticks would fetch; the buildings became inexpressibly mean and hideous. Labour was scarce; but wages fell

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<sup>265</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by James Redmond (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, repr. 1977), p.60.

<sup>266</sup> Morris, ed. by Redmond, p.61, p.59, p.61, p.78.

nevertheless. All the small country arts of life which once added to the little pleasures of country people were lost.<sup>267</sup>

Instead, Morris offers a concept of society that anticipates contemporary environmentalist versions of Marxism, such as social ecology or eco-Marxism.<sup>268</sup> Compare Morris' utopia with Pepper's more recent vision, in which Pepper (1993) states:

The true, post-revolutionary, communist society will be classless, and when it is attained the state, environmental disruption, economic exploitation, war and patriarchy will all wither away, being no longer necessary.<sup>269</sup>

Engels dismissively described Morris as 'a settled sentimental Socialist'.<sup>270</sup> Given the similarities between Morris' vision and modern, environmentally friendly versions of Marxism, and bearing in mind 'the environmental horrors' perpetuated by state socialism throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, Engels' criticism would seem to rebound: perhaps Morris was himself the greater visionary, and his version of pastoral both politically radical and environmentally sound.<sup>271</sup> After all, *News*

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<sup>267</sup> Morris, ed. by Redmond, p.60.

<sup>268</sup> See Garrard, pp.27-30.

<sup>269</sup> David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.207-8.

<sup>270</sup> 'He would be easily managed if one saw him regularly a couple of times a week, but who has the time to do it, and if you drop him for a month, he is sure to lose himself again'; letter from Engels to Laura Lafargue, 13 September 1886, in the *Marx & Engels Internet Archive*

<<http://www.Marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/letters>> [accessed 12 January 2010].

<sup>271</sup> Garrard, p.30.

*from Nowhere* offers an analysis of nineteenth-century exploitation that goes beyond conventional interpretations of Marx's writings:

'Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – “nature”, as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make “nature” their slave, since they thought “nature” was something outside them.'<sup>272</sup>

This kind of eco-centric awareness anticipates not Social, but Deep Ecology. Nor is Morris' novel an isolated instance. In writing *News from Nowhere*, he was much influenced by Jefferies' *After London* (1885), a second important example of a late-century 'literature of the land' that challenges our sense of it as somehow indulgent and undemanding.

Richard Jefferies' identity as a writer is now firmly associated with his nature writing. In the words of an introduction to an early anthology of his writings, he is pre-eminently 'the naturalist-poet, the author of the books which interpret the spirit of rural England'.<sup>273</sup> He was also, however, a prolific if largely unsuccessful novelist. *After London* (1885) is an important example of his highly distinctive fiction. In the novel, the world's greatest city is simply washed away – one might say, wished away – by an

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<sup>272</sup> Morris, ed. by Redmond, p.154.

<sup>273</sup> *Readings from Richard Jefferies: An Anthology of the Countryside*, ed. by Ronald Hook (London: Macmillan, 1940, repr. 1948), p.x.



unexplained, perhaps natural disaster. The city now lies submerged beneath a foul swamp from which there exhales 'so fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it'.<sup>274</sup> As John Fowles observes, 'Jefferies yielded nothing to Morris' in longing for an apocalypse that would wipe out 'urban evil'.<sup>275</sup>

If – to use the term pejoratively – Jefferies had simply been a 'pastoral' novelist and *After London* a 'pastoral' novel, Jefferies would oppose urban vice with rural virtue, but Britain after the fall of its great cities is, as the novel's subtitle ('Wild England') suggests, neither peaceful nor prosperous: 'everything fell quickly into barbarism'.<sup>276</sup> Isolated tribes take the place of a coherent and civilised society. In the brutal struggle to survive, vengeance takes the place of law: 'the Romany looks on the Bushman as a dog, and slaughters him as such'.<sup>277</sup> Nor is there anything in this vision to suggest that, forced back into intimate dependence on the natural world, humankind would necessarily learn respect for it. Those who subsist entirely (but expertly) 'upon roots and trapped game' sometimes 'in fits of savage frenzy destroy thrice as much as they can devour'.<sup>278</sup>

Jefferies offers neither dystopia nor utopia: the novel's ending is ambiguous, pointing to more change, not to any artificial static state. It is, therefore, a markedly more radical novel than *News From Nowhere*. Beyond revolution, Morris predicts the possibility of an ideal future society, even as he returns his time-travelling narrator to the unsatisfactory present. Jefferies shows us something much more unsettling: a society

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<sup>274</sup> Richard Jefferies, *After London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.37.

<sup>275</sup> Jefferies, p.xvii.

<sup>276</sup> Jefferies, p.22.

<sup>277</sup> Jefferies, p.23.

<sup>278</sup> Jefferies, p.20.

stripped 'to essentials'.<sup>279</sup> It is also a much more liberating and radical vision. W. J. Keith remarks that, in *After London*, it is not the town that has overwhelmed the country, but 'the country that has survived and destroyed the town'.<sup>280</sup> Not so: that is Morris' vision, not Jefferies'. In *After London*, the environment – 'nature' – has reasserted itself, erasing both countryside and cityscape. 'Footpaths were concealed by the second year'; 'by the thirtieth year there was not one single open place, the hills only excepted, where a man could walk, unless he followed the tracks of wild creatures or cut himself a path'.<sup>281</sup> Jefferies returns us, not to the world where a rural way of life has triumphed over an urban one, but to a world where nature is once again the master of man.<sup>282</sup> It insists (as Wordsworth does in poems like 'Michael') that 'only nature, not human society, has any permanence'.<sup>283</sup>

As Gervais remarks, Jefferies' vision of 'Wild England' is 'a salutary antidote to conventional pastoral'.<sup>284</sup> So too, he adds, is Egdon Heath, the setting of Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*.<sup>285</sup> This is, therefore, an opportune moment to extend the process of re-evaluation to include Hardy. As I noted earlier in the Chapter, he and Jefferies are often cited as pre-eminent influences on late-Victorian writing about the countryside, and it is possible to compare them directly. Jefferies first came to the public's attention for a collection of newspaper articles entitled *Hodge and His Masters*

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<sup>279</sup> John Fowles, in Jefferies, p.xix.

<sup>280</sup> W. J. Keith, *Richard Jefferies: A Critical Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p.122.

<sup>281</sup> Jefferies, p.2, p.3.

<sup>282</sup> But the comparison may do Morris an injustice. In protesting against the loss of Epping Forest, Morris made it clear that it was 'thicket, not a park' he wanted to save, as 'a sample left to show what the great north-eastern forest was like.' Morris' own vision of a garden was wilder than we might today imagine. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. by Asa Briggs (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962, repr. 1984), p.308.

<sup>283</sup> Gervais, p.3.

<sup>284</sup> Gervais, p.21.

<sup>285</sup> Gervais, p.21.

(1880), a collection notable for its reactionary response to labourers' demands for higher wages. Whilst *Hodge* was not by any means Jefferies' last word on the subject, his remarks prompted Hardy to respond in kind, with an article written for *Longman's Magazine* in July 1883 and entitled 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'. Here, Hardy wryly deconstructed 'the words of a recent writer on the labouring classes', and with it, 'the Hodge of current conception'.<sup>286</sup> As Angel discovers in *Tess*, 'at close quarters no Hodge was to be seen' (*TD*, p.117). More importantly, its even-handed tone does not suggest the kind of writer inclined to transform these observations into any idealised pastoral idyll.

In fact, and whilst some critics have taken Hardy to task for idealising rural life, others have criticised him for presenting too bleak a view of it. Some have even admired him for it: 'I would be tempted to call Hardy the only great pessimist in our literature', wrote John Cowper Powys.<sup>287</sup> To quote one recent history of literature, 'a familiar response to Hardy is to call him a fatalist who shows his characters as oppressed and defeated by a malign destiny'.<sup>288</sup> As Empson famously remarked:

Thus Hardy is fond of showing us an unusually stupid person subjected to very unusually bad luck, and then a moral is drawn, not merely by inference but by

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<sup>286</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, pp.168-191 (p.169, p.171)

<sup>287</sup> Powys, p.606.

<sup>288</sup> Bernard Bergonzi 'Late Victorian to Modernist (1880-1930)', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, repr. 1990), pp.379-430 (p.394).

solemn assertion, that we are all in the same boat as this person whose story is striking precisely because it is unusual.<sup>289</sup>

'It is clear', concludes Empson, 'that this grand notion of the inadequacy of life, so various in its means of expression, so reliable a bass note in the arts, needs to be counted as a possible territory of the pastoral.'<sup>290</sup> In other words, Hardy can and has been criticised for the contrary tendency to produce an *anti-pastoral*, or what Gifford describes as an 'equally distorted' but 'negative version of the countryside'.<sup>291</sup> The difficulty, of course, is that gauging whether or not this interpretation is correct largely depends on the quality of life whose portrayal Hardy allegedly distorts.

The problem may be illustrated by brief reference to works by two later writers who also focused on the land. The first work is a poem by R. S. Thomas entitled 'The Welsh Hill Country', which opens *An Acre of Land* (1952):

Too far for you to see  
The fluke and the foot rot and the fat maggot  
Gnawing the skin from the small bones,  
The sheep are grazing at Bwlch-y-Fedwen,  
Arranged romantically in the usual manner

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<sup>289</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.96; originally published in 1935.

<sup>290</sup> Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p.96.

<sup>291</sup> Gifford, 'Towards a Post-Pastoral View of British Poetry', in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.51-63 (p.56).

On a bleak background of bald stone.<sup>292</sup>

Here, a romanticised vision of country life has been undermined by the facts of 'the fluke and the foot rot and the fat maggot', but this alternative and apparently dispassionate version might itself seem to be rooted in exaggeration. Yet this is not the case. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, rural life was exceptionally hard, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Great War. By the 1930s, the rural economy was entirely impoverished; the countryside was 'full of derelict farms'.<sup>293</sup> The average wages of labourers were a third of those earned in towns, and homes more or less squalid; in rural Wales, 'two-thirds of the cottages were condemned as unfit for human habitation'.<sup>294</sup> Furthermore, it is no longer widely appreciated that, well before the advent of factory farming, infection from diseased animals was 'commonplace'.<sup>295</sup> Given that, in the early 1930s, it was estimated that 40% of cows in England and Wales were infected with tuberculosis, inadvertent cross-contamination was probably inevitable. In fact, it was not necessarily through ignorance that disease entered the food chain: faced with financial ruin, farmers often kept quiet and knowingly sold on 'infected beef or milk'.<sup>296</sup>

Contrast this observed reality, based on first-hand accounts and modern scholarship, with the tone and tenor of Constance Holme's preface to *The Lonely Plough* (1914), a novel about the 'old order' of life in the country:

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<sup>292</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'The Welsh Hill Country', ll.1-6, in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p.22.

<sup>293</sup> Steve Humphries and Beverley Hopwood, *Green and Pleasant Land* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p.108.

<sup>294</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.111.

<sup>295</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.107.

<sup>296</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.106.

And the need for loyalty remains – for honesty and straight dealing and confidence in our fellows. The land teaches these virtues, for it will be satisfied with nothing less. ‘Be honest with the land’, say the farmers, ‘and it will be honest with you’ – and while we have land we shall have the lesson. These necessities are fundamental and do not alter.<sup>297</sup>

Holme added this preface in 1931, the same year that over a thousand children died of tuberculosis in England and Wales ‘through drinking infected milk’.<sup>298</sup> Perhaps the facts make a mockery of her remarks – or perhaps the facts make this plea for ‘honesty and straight dealing’ all the more pertinent.

Context is therefore important in understanding and properly weighing the tone of contemporary responses to rural life. Thomas’s poem effectively punctures the pastoral presumptions of his readers because it is accurate. Indeed, the realities of rural life in the inter-war years make it difficult to conceive of an ‘anti-pastoral’ savage enough to exaggerate or distort. Nor was Hardy’s experience of life in the Victorian countryside any less exacting: ‘as a child I knew a sheep-keeping boy who to my horror shortly afterwards died of want’, Hardy recalled, ‘the contents of his stomach at autopsy being raw turnip only’ (*LW*, p.335). Down to ‘1850 or 1855’, he remarked, the condition of agricultural labourers ‘was in general one of great hardship’ (*LW*, p.335).

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<sup>297</sup> Constance Holme, *The Lonely Plough* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914, repr. 1950), p.vii, p.viii.

<sup>298</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.107.

Millgate confirms Dorset's contemporary reputation as a poor and backward corner of the country; and that reputation was not easily shed.<sup>299</sup> In 1908, a major survey of the county commented that 'the lot of the agriculturist' was 'cast in very hard places'; depression had 'left its mark on the county's chief industry', and Dorset, 'which at one time was pre-eminently the county of the yeoman, has seen this most useful class of men almost extinguished within its borders'.<sup>300</sup>

Against this backdrop, it may be evident that Hardy's alleged pessimism owes more to the lived realities of rural life than to his frame of mind; indeed, it is on this basis that critics like Squires have mounted a sustained attempt to demonstrate how and in what ways the 'idyllic qualities' of a number of Hardy's 'pastoral' novels are in fact dissolved by their realism.<sup>301</sup> Tess may have her halcyon days at Talbothays, in the 'long-sought-for vale' of the Great Dairies, but she also suffers Flintcomb-Ash, 'a starve-acre place' where she works a field the colour of 'desolate drab' (*TD*, p.102, p.285); and by contrast with both, she also experiences a strange, uncultivated garden through which she walks towards Angel one summer evening, drawn by the sound of his harp:

She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights

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<sup>299</sup> 'Villages decayed and became paces of filth and disease, with farmyard drainage running into the streets or beneath the earth floors of the ruinous cottages in which whole families, of both sexes and all ages, were sometimes forced to sleep in a single bedroom.' Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.36.

<sup>300</sup> *The Victoria History of the County of Dorset*, ed. by William Page (Folkestone: Dawson, 1908, repr. 1975), II, p.275. Ninety-two volumes of the Victoria History were published between 1900 and Page's death in 1934.

<sup>301</sup> Squires, p.3.

which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made blood-red stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near Clare, still unobserved of him. (*TD*, p.122-123)

These examples would suggest that Hardy's novels cannot, after all, be so easily classified, whether as 'pastoral' or, for that matter, as 'anti-pastoral'. Indeed, this difficulty of classification or categorisation is thrown into sharp relief by *The Woodlanders*, which forms the eco-critical focus of the next section.

### ***The Woodlanders***

Critics have not always been kind to Hardy, and on occasion, literary and social patronage overlap. For Somerset Maugham, 'he had still the strange look of the soil'; for F. R. Leavis, he was a countryman whose 'brooding mind stayed itself habitually upon the simple pieties, the quiet rhythms, and the immemorial ritual of rustic life'; for David Cecil, he was 'the last lonely representative of an ancient race', raised in a region where 'the ancient mode of life lingered longest', but who had strayed 'into the alien world of the later nineteenth century'.<sup>302</sup> The difficulty is that, with this version of Hardy in mind, it is perfectly possible to reduce his complex, allusive fiction to a simplistic form of the 'pastoral', and, as a consequence, to marginalize or dismiss it; and it is as a form of pastoral that *The Woodlanders* can very easily be (mis)read.

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<sup>302</sup> Quoted in Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Hogarth, 1984, repr. 1987), p.99; F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: a Study of the Contemporary Situation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.49; David Cecil, *Hardy the Novelist* (London: Constable, 1943), p.148. According to Merryn Williams, this view of Hardy was still 'firmly established' in the 1960s; Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy*, p.xiii.



Published in 1887, the title of *The Woodlanders* not only hints at the pastoral, but echoes the title of an earlier, and highly successful novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), which Hardy wrote specifically to capitalize on the popularity of rural scenes in contemporary literature. Hardy considered *The Woodlanders* 'quaint and fresh' and, perhaps 'owing to the locality and scenery of the action', liked this story 'best of all'.<sup>303</sup> Its setting, given the 'romantic name' of Little Hintock, is 'one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world', a place of 'sylvan' trees and 'shady groves' 'where the lanes yet remained as narrow as before the days of turnpike roads'; a quiet, settled community, where one might find 'more meditation than action'.<sup>304</sup>

Taking his cue from descriptions such as these, Guerard described *The Woodlanders* as a 'charming idyll laid in a remote Arcadia'.<sup>305</sup> If the novel's setting is typical of the pastoral, so is the way in which it phrases its criticism of nineteenth century life: the values of the town are contrasted with those of the countryside, and found wanting; the one impacts on the other, and unhappiness results.

As I have already pointed out, this kind of pastoral may constitute a perfectly legitimate form of criticism, and no less legitimately a form of eco-criticism. In fact, and as I go on to explain later in this section, *The Woodlanders* is more sophisticated than this schematic interpretation implies. Nonetheless, the tension between town and country life forms an important part of the novel's fabric, and Hardy's handling of it appears to anticipate, even to illustrate the concerns of those modern environmentalists

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<sup>303</sup> Quoted in *TW*, p.xvi; *LW*, p.520.

<sup>304</sup> *TW*, p.8, p.52, p.53, p.95. Hardy's depiction of this world had a lasting influence on the way in which it was seen by outsiders; Charles Simpson's memoir of Dorset recalls the years 1942-3, and is full of descriptions of 'men who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of *The Woodlanders*'; Simpson, *The Country of the Woodlanders: A Wartime Memoir of Hardy's Wessex* (Penzance: West Cornwall Art Archive, 2005), p.16.

<sup>305</sup> Guerard, quoted by Squires, p.1.

who see in restless, rootless city life another index of environmental crisis. My analysis therefore begins with what is essentially a pastoral contrast between two very different ways of life.

As a novel, *The Woodlanders* develops an idea suggested by the opening sentence of *Under the Greenwood Tree* ('to dwellers in a wood, almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature'), and rehearsed in *The Return of the Native*: the paramount importance of a lived but also learned relationship with the environment or, in the words of the novel, of an 'intelligent intercourse with Nature'.<sup>306</sup> This is not just a biocentric, but an ecocentric relationship, linking the biotic and the abiotic. Those who live 'deeply engrossed' within the 'wood-environed' world of Little Hintock have 'an almost exhaustive biographical and historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon'.<sup>307</sup> None are more attuned to that environment than Giles and Marty:

They had planted together, and together they had felled; together they had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few are of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet. From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces when brushing them in the dark, they could pronounce upon the species of tree whence they stretched; from the quality of the wind's murmur through a bough, they could in like manner name its sort afar off. (*TW*, p.331)

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<sup>306</sup> *UGT*, p.11, *TW*, p.330.

<sup>307</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p.137; *TW*, p.8, p.125.

Giles and Marty might therefore be described as an Adam and Eve, unaffected son and daughter of an eco-system – ‘that wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods’ – whose value they recognise and whose meanings they understand without need of interpretation (*TW*, p.330). Thus Giles appears to Grace ‘as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation: sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen’, but ‘sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips’ (*TW*, p.278). As the narrator remarks, Giles’ fingers ‘were endowed with a gentle conjuror’s touch’ (*TW*, p.64):

He had a marvellous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly, there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on; so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days. (*TW*, p.63)

As the narrator elsewhere points out, Giles sees his environment ‘from the conjuror’s own point of view, and not from that of the spectator’ (*TW*, p.331). Conversely, the town-bred (Fitzpiers, Felice) have no such involvement with (and therefore appreciation of) their environment, whilst the town-educated have all too quickly forgotten what they once knew: as he returns with her from the railway station, Giles is surprised to find that Grace no longer registers the detailed differences of trees and orchard. Her mind is elsewhere, thinking of ‘a broad lawn in the fashionable suburb of a fast city’ (*TW*, p.42). In ‘all the pride of life’, she has ‘fallen from the good old Hintock ways’ (*TW*, p.42, p.44).

Fitzpiers, on the other hand, lacks this kind of 'old association'; and, as the narrator points out:

The spot may have beauty, grandeur, salubrity, convenience; but if it lacks memories it will ultimately pall upon him who settles there without opportunity of intercourse with his kind. (*TW*, p.125)

'I was made for higher things', Fitzpiers declares, between yawns (*TW*, p.49). Felice is characterized by the same 'mien of listlessness', the same 'wandering' nature (*TW*, p.59, p.61). Unable to appreciate the significance of what lies within her own horizon (a place 'full of beauty'), she travels the world gathering surface impressions that never cohere, too disengaged even to record them: 'I think sometimes I was born to live and do nothing, nothing, nothing but float about', she declares (*TW*, p.57, p.59). There are dangers in the narrow parochialism of a closed community, 'where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises', but these citizens of the world are no happier for their grand tours (*TW*, p.9). On the contrary, they are never at ease, never at home, never even entirely comfortable inside their own skins. Instead, they are always acting a role: in false relation to each other as to the environment, Felice, Fitzpiers, and Felice's assassin are linked by 'their theatricality and melodramatic behaviour'.<sup>308</sup>

As Grace remarks of Fitzpiers, he is 'a tropical plant in a hedgerow, a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices which had nothing in common with the life around' (*TW*, p.50). In the words of an eco-critic, he embodies 'scientific progress as opposed to

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<sup>308</sup> Ingham, *TW*, p.xxiv.

local knowledge', and a philosophy that 'thinks not of symbiosis between human community and natural environment, but of two opposing realms, interior and exterior, mind and world'.<sup>309</sup> Like Felice, he seduces the country-folk; like Felice, he is a beguiling representative of a world that impacts on Little Hintock with fatal consequences. Grace is seduced, Giles dies, and the balance disturbed. Fitzpiers' solution to John South's dangerous delusions is to cut down the tree that appears to be their source: the shock kills him. 'D-d if my remedy hasn't killed him!' murmurs Fitzpiers, who, subject apparently closed, then turns to ask a speechless Giles for the name of the lady he spied 'over the hedge the other day' (*TW*, p.102).

Although *The Woodlanders* appears to follow the conventional pattern of the pastoral, it also contains an implicitly environmentalist message, in which the values of a restless, modern existence are contrasted with a traditional life lived in environmental balance, where a 'thousand young fir-trees' will quickly take the place of those cleared by the woodcutters (*TW*, p.63). This is a balance about which the landowner, Felice, knows little and cares less: 'I might fell, top, or lop, on my own judgment, any stick o' timber whatever in her wood', declares Melbury; 'I wish she took more interest in the place, and stayed here all year round' (*TW*, p.46).

The problem with this reinterpretation – an interpretation broadly aligned with the Deep Ecology platform – is that it nonetheless depends on the schematic contrast between the values of town and country or, as Ryle remarks, between a 'developed metropolitan consciousness and mutely autochthonous "organic" being'.<sup>310</sup> It remains a

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<sup>309</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.16, p.17.

<sup>310</sup> Martin Ryle, 'After "Organic Community": Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature', in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.11-23 (p.19).

version of the pastoral that does not do justice to the realities of actual, lived life. Nor, for that matter, does it do full justice to Hardy's novel, which contemporary readers sometimes found discomfiting in its immediacy and directness; although none of the reviews was 'entirely negative', the *Spectator* (26 March 1887) pronounced it 'as disagreeable as it is powerful'.<sup>311</sup>

By any standard, life in Little Hintock is difficult, and Hardy does nothing to conceal the fact. The novel's opening description leads immediately to Marty (Chapter 2), sat making spars in the cottage where her father lies sick. To make a living, she must do the work he cannot, and works until three in the morning (Chapter 3) to do so, her hands 'red and blistering' (*TW*, p.10). Furthermore, she must keep it a secret that the work is hers; this is a trade for which she is not and cannot as a woman be qualified, despite her natural aptitude ('your father with his forty years of practice never made a spar better than that' (*TW*, p.22)). Not that it is enough to maintain her. To make ends meet, she is forced to sell her hair for a sovereign it would otherwise take a week and a half to earn 'at that rough man's work' (*TW*, p.12). Although 'struggling bravely', her efforts may in any case come to naught: with the death of her father, she will lose her home (*TW*, p.46).

The 'only really pleasant part' of the story, wrote the *Spectator*, 'is the picture of the woodlands themselves'.<sup>312</sup> Yet Hardy was equally ready to record the harshness of the environment, where stoats are glimpsed 'sucking the blood of the rabbits', a sunless winter's day dawns like 'the bleared white visage' of 'a dead-born child', and leaves are

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<sup>311</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.262; R. H. Hutton, *Spectator*, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.142.

<sup>312</sup> R. H. Hutton, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.145.

'dwarfed and sickly for want of sunlight' (*TW*, p.23, p.25). This is certainly no simple or simplifying 'pastoral', but a counter-weight that turns the novel towards a balanced description of actual, lived life.

For Raymond Williams, this was an important reason why Hardy counted as part of 'a more central English tradition' of the novel that links George Eliot with D. H. Lawrence.<sup>313</sup> In Williams' view, Hardy was a writer caught up in a still continuing process of change: this was his subject, and this was the reason why he was still relevant. For the British (but not necessarily the American) eco-critic, Williams is an essential point of reference; his materialist concerns overlap with and suggest important lines of advance for any environmentally aware discourse.<sup>314</sup> Williams' seminal work on *The Country and the City* (1973) is a notable instance of this community of interest. However, many of Williams' most perceptive and relevant remarks were originally published in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, a sometimes-verbatim transcript of lectures delivered in the 1960s, and what Widdowson calls 'an ur-text' for those engaged in a cultural-materialistic approach to Hardy; it frames the discussion that follows.<sup>315</sup>

The transition to which Williams referred was, he wrote, a shift from a life shaped by long-standing customs and habits and a deep-rooted sense of place, to a modern, mobile existence, 'newly conscious and self-conscious'.<sup>316</sup> Hardy's Wessex was caught in this transition. Indeed, Hardy's own life (and arguably his writing style) was shaped

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<sup>313</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.95; originally published 1970.

<sup>314</sup> See Ryle, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.11-23 (p.12).

<sup>315</sup> Peter Widdowson, 'Hardy and Critical Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.73-92 (p.80).

<sup>316</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.99.

by it: his was a 'border country', a transitional state with which Williams' own generation was wholly familiar.<sup>317</sup> Whether or not that familiarity still shapes the experience of more modern generations is a different, difficult, but nonetheless relevant question. For the majority of Britons, life on the land has long since been left behind. It would seem absurd to argue that British society still looks longingly back to a rural past; yet that nostalgia persists, perhaps because (rather than in spite of the fact that) modern society has made its transition, and completed the process to which Williams referred. Perhaps its continuing need to believe in an idealized and stable rural life is also a measure of how wholly modern society is possessed by the restless pursuit of novelty and change. For the eco-critic, the irony is that this idealization also appears to inform the tendency for some environmentalists to look longingly back to an original, an undisturbed state of harmonious co-existence between humankind and its environment.

As I have suggested, just such a state of harmonious co-existence can be read into the pages of *The Woodlanders*. It is not, however, Hardy's last word on the subject. From the outset, the idea that Little Hintock might represent some form of latterday Arcadia is undermined by the crippling socio-economic realities that affect those who own neither land nor property, a lesson that Melbury teaches Grace when he pointedly insists that she review the bonds and properties on which her future security depends (*TW*, p.86-88). This society is governed by long-settled relationships between 'landowners, tenant farmers, dealers, craftsmen and labourers', a complex society

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<sup>317</sup> As Williams remarks, Hardy's relationship to rural society is uncertain: he 'is neither owner nor tenant, dealer nor labourer, but an observer and chronicler'; furthermore, he is not writing for the rural society about which he is writing, but for a 'mainly metropolitan and unconnected literary public'; see Williams, *The English Novel*, p.101, p.98.



whose careful gradations undermine any generalized reference to peasants and peasantry.<sup>318</sup>

'Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate', wrote Karl Marx, 'and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature':

He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants.<sup>319</sup>

But whilst Marty's relationship to her environment may be intimate and immediate, others have already appropriated her labour. She does not own the wood from which she makes spars, since there are no commons left from which she may gather it; she does not make those spars to fix her own roof, since she has no roof of her own, and will (like Giles) have no home the moment her father dies and the life-hold lease expires. She exists, or rather, subsists, only because of the monetary value accrued by her labour. Her relationship to the environment is everything a Deep Ecologist might wish for, but it does not survive first contact with a capitalist economy that has already bound its citizens in wage slavery and further discriminated against them by gender.<sup>320</sup>

Marty is a marginal presence in the world of the woodlanders; indeed, she is a marginal

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<sup>318</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.100.

<sup>319</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, I, Part III, Chapter 7, Section 1, in the *Marx & Engels Internet Archive* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>> [accessed 12 January, 2010].

<sup>320</sup> Even Grace is made to feel as if she is 'a mere chattel', likely to 'yield a better return' than horses, wagons, and corn; see *TW*, p.88.

presence in the novel itself. Ultimately, this is true also of Giles. Both are the background to what might otherwise be dismissed as a variant of a sensation novel; and whilst the Deep Ecologist will point to them as true representatives of an organic community, the Social Ecologist will point out that it has already been overwhelmed, as have they. As Hardy remarked in a later Postscript to *The Woodlanders*, this world of work was 'almost extinguished' by 1912; indeed, the woodland itself was slowly disappearing.<sup>321</sup> Capitalism is corrosive and all-conquering and, as Kerridge remarks, Giles and Marty's 'close association with trees signifies deep-rootedness but also vulnerability': although self-contained and self-sustaining, theirs is a world as fragile as any ecosystem, delicately poised, and susceptible to upset.<sup>322</sup>

Seen in these terms, as Williams remarks, it is no longer possible to reduce *The Woodlanders* to the collision between modern, metropolitan outsider and a closed, country community or 'to the impact of an urban alien on the "timeless pattern" of English rural life'.<sup>323</sup> Country life has generated its own pressures, its own catalysts for change: like Tess, Clym, and Jude, Grace Melbury finds that she is still tied to a way of life from which her now educated expectations have distanced her. A supposed rural idyll is undone from within, not from without, by a growing awareness of other, 'incompatible ways of being'.<sup>324</sup>

This was a point Hardy made in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', where he suggested that, inevitably, urbanized existence appeared more appealing to those who lived and

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<sup>321</sup> TW, p.369. Extrapolating from the Domesday Book, it appears that approximately 16% of the county was once wooded; by 1905, the figure was 6%; *History of the County of Dorset*, ed. by Page, p.287, p.298.

<sup>322</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p.137.

<sup>323</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.102.

<sup>324</sup> Ryle, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.11-23 (p.22).

worked on the land; and if that was not to the taste of middle-class outsiders, well, 'it is only the old story that progress and picturesqueness do not harmonise': 'it is too much for them to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators.'<sup>325</sup> As Tess protests, 'I am only a peasant by position, not by nature!'<sup>326</sup> And for those who are, like Tess, economically disadvantaged, talk of (re)establishing a spiritually satisfying relationship with the environment may well seem absurd.

This tension is explored in greater detail in the next section, which takes as its subject another of Hardy's most important novels, *The Return of the Native*.

### ***The Return of the Native***

The central character in *The Return of Native* is Clym Yeobright, the 'native' of the title. Like Grace in *The Woodlanders*, he is a returning local; unlike Grace, however, he returns convinced 'that the want of most men was knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom rather than affluence' (*RN*, p.174). Yeobright's downfall derives from his failure to recognise that, on the contrary, it is affluence in which a poverty-stricken rural society is interested:

We can hardly imagine bucolic placidity quickening to intellectual aims without imagining social aims as the transitional phase. Yeobright's local peculiarity was

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<sup>325</sup> Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, pp.168-191 (p.181).

<sup>326</sup> *TD*, p.232.

that in striving at high thinking he still cleaved to plain living – nay, wild and meagre living in many respects, and brotherliness with clowns. (*RN*, p.174)

As the narrator dryly remarks, Yeobright is ahead of his time: 'the rural world was not ripe for him': a 'man who advocates aesthetic effort and deprecates social effort is only likely to be understood by a class to which social effort has become a stale matter' (*RN*, p.175). Yeobright's mother therefore finds it baffling that he should not want to carry 'straight on' in the business of 'doing well' – but as Clym replies, 'what is doing well?' (*RN*, p.177, p.178)

'After all these years', notes Williams, 'no question is more relevant or more radical': it points to the real cost of progress.<sup>327</sup> But Hardy himself does not offer a straightforward answer to the question, here or elsewhere. As Kerridge remarks, his novels are 'profoundly – one might say dangerously – unreconciled to inequalities of wealth and power.'<sup>328</sup>

Hardy's argument is important not only for its recognition of this conflict, this complexity, but because it also depends on a recognition that Yeobright's is not the reflexive or customary and intuitive response of an individual deeply immersed in a traditional society, but the considered opinion of a man with a modern education. Indeed, Hardy's argument is itself a function of 'relative and historical thinking'.<sup>329</sup> His recreation of Wessex depends, as Williams remarks, on just such an educated perspective:

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<sup>327</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.105, p.104.

<sup>328</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p.138.

<sup>329</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.104.

Even the sense of what is 'timeless' – in fact the sense of history, of the barrows, the Roman remains, the rise and fall of families, the tablets and monuments in the churches – is a function of education.<sup>330</sup>

In re-examining *The Return of the Native*, we should also bear in mind Buell's criticism of it as a novel that privileges people rather than place:

Measured against the totality of what might have been said about the Wessex ecosystem, even on the basis of biology's still rudimentary state, Hardy barely scratched the surface.<sup>331</sup>

In fact, the novel opens with the most remarkable description of Egdon Heath, a place apart from people, a place with such influence and importance that it too seems to live.

The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half-an-hour to eve; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread [...] The untameable, Ishmaelish thing that Egdon now was it had always been. Civilization was its enemy. (*RN*, p.3, p.5)

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<sup>330</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.108.

<sup>331</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.255.

'This is a constant revelation in Hardy's novels', wrote D. H. Lawrence in an important piece of early criticism: 'that there exists a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it'.<sup>332</sup> Yet as Buell points out, Egdon is not a wilderness. To co-opt the titles of the opening two chapters, Egdon may be a 'Face on which Time makes but Little Impression', but the reader need only wait for the next chapter before 'Humanity appears upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble'. In the long run, the heath is 'ancillary' to the story of the protagonist, Clym: ultimately, the novel is, as Buell suggests, 'about people in place, not about place itself'.<sup>333</sup>

Buell's criticism, in part, prompted Richard Kerridge's article 'Ecological Hardy', one of the first and most significant eco-critical responses to Hardy's work.<sup>334</sup> Here, Kerridge points out that 'the special value of Hardy to ecocritics is precisely the way he does not separate place and person'.<sup>335</sup> In a country as crowded as Britain, this is, perhaps, inevitable. Strictly speaking, there can be no such thing as wilderness and, therefore, no such thing as place without people; this was no less true when Wordsworth scaled Snowdon to see the sun rise – having first found a guide to show him the way.<sup>336</sup> In reality, as naturalists today point out, apparently wild spaces such as

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<sup>332</sup> From the *Study of Thomas Hardy*, in D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1956, repr. 1973), pp.166-228 (p.176). Less than half the *Study* refers directly to Hardy, but it nonetheless represents an early appreciation of Hardy's responsiveness to the interaction between humankind and its environment.

<sup>333</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.255.

<sup>334</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', pp.126-142. In an abbreviated form, Kerridge's essay appears in *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. by Coupe, pp.267-274. Bate (in the opening chapter of *Song of the Earth*) also explores Hardy's eco-critical significance, but, like Kerridge, the discussion is confined to the novels. The work of both writers is a general influence on the discussion that follows.

<sup>335</sup> Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p.141.

<sup>336</sup> Wordsworth's youthful ascent begins Book Thirteen of *The Prelude* (1799-1806); see *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.464.

the heath on which Hardy modelled Egdon are themselves the result of human intervention.<sup>337</sup>

Hardy's insistence on showing the continuing interdependence of people and place does not, therefore, misrepresent or mystify socio-economic realities, as pastoral is sometimes alleged to do: it simply and effectively illustrates our reliance on the environment. 'Economics ultimately depends on ecology', and as the global population grows beyond six billion, the fact of that connection grows steadily more obvious as the nature of that connection grows more fragile.<sup>338</sup> Given what can only be described as humankind's belated recognition of the value of 'eco-system services' – the provision of clean air, fresh water, fertile soil, and a viable climate – it can in fact be argued that traditional, and overly narrow definitions of economic 'reality' in fact constitute their own form of mystification.

But Hardy's critique goes deeper than this, to the roots of our environmental predicament. Like the pastoral, its key-note is regret, but this regret reflects the loss of a living relationship with nonhuman nature. It is integral to Hardy's fiction, but also integral to the work of those who wrote in his shadow. Seeking the common thread that united the disparate rural fiction of the period 1900-1939, for example, Cavaliero noted a shared interest in humankind's 'vital struggle' with the environment: 'man does not live by man alone'.<sup>339</sup> In fact, the awareness of a lost, living relationship with the environment is itself an inheritance from the Romantic tradition. Bate notes that it

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<sup>337</sup> 'The old belief that heathland is wholly natural, on soils which do not allow trees to grow,' notes Rackham, 'has been overtaken': numerous pollen studies make it 'quite clear' that traditional heathland areas were once covered by trees. Oliver Rackham, *The History of Countryside* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000, repr. 2002), p.286.

<sup>338</sup> Garrard, p.42.

<sup>339</sup> Cavaliero, p.204.

reflects a distinction drawn by Friedrich Schiller in an essay 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry', which rewrites 'Rousseau's story of our fall away from nature'.<sup>340</sup> Whereas the naïve poetry of the ancients reflected a lived and living relationship with the environment – immediate, authentic, and unconscious of any division between human and non-human worlds – modern 'sentimental' or 'reflective' poetry was cursed by self-awareness, awareness of self as separate from environment. This alienation shaped an overriding sense of loss, a characteristic note of regret. As Schiller remarked, poets 'will either *be* nature, or they will *seek* lost nature', since consciousness cannot be undone.<sup>341</sup> What is needed, Gifford therefore argues, is 'a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human'.<sup>342</sup> What is needed is a vision like Hardy's, shaped by a sense of symbiosis, not of dominance; where, as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886):<sup>343</sup>

Bees and butterflies in the cornfields at the top of town, who desired to get to the meads at the bottom, took no circuitous course, but flew straight down High Street without any apparent consciousness that they were traversing strange latitudes.<sup>344</sup>

This returns us to Buell, and a second, important objection to his emphasis on place rather than people, and, by extension, to the views of earlier critics like Cecil and

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<sup>340</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.73.

<sup>341</sup> Quoted in Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.73.

<sup>342</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.148.

<sup>343</sup> As Gatrell remarks of the relationship between characters and Egdon in *The Return of the Native*, 'it is a symbiosis, not a domination'; *RN*, p.xviii.

<sup>344</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, New Wessex Edition (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.88.



Howe, who described Wessex as a feudal region where 'the ancient mode of life lingered longest', a changeless place 'unaffected by history or technology'.<sup>345</sup> This is, as Harvey observes, 'a carefully edited version of Hardy's Wessex'.<sup>346</sup> With its insistence on an unchanged and unchanging rural idyll peopled by innocent country-folk, it tends to 'run together' the heaths and woods and those working on them, reducing humankind to 'creatures crawling on this timeless expanse', lost in a landscape.<sup>347</sup> It makes possible – indeed depends on – what Williams called 'a romantic attachment to a way of life in which the people are merely instrumental'.<sup>348</sup> Hardy was perfectly capable of just such a depiction. His status as a 'king of the pastoral' depended on it. But, and as we have seen in this necessarily brief glance at key aspects of two of his mature works, Hardy's early willingness to give his audience what they wanted – 'the picturesqueness, the rough humour, the smocked innocence of "the bucolic" – is soon overtaken by an altogether more complex and troubling meditation on life lived in a still green world.<sup>349</sup>

Eustacia Vye, another of the characters in *The Return of the Native*, is relevant here. Eustacia's relationship to the heath is the opposite of Clym's. His is harmonious, hers rebellious, and his love for it, her hatred: 'take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym' (*RN*, p.175-6).

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<sup>345</sup> Cecil, *Hardy the Novelist*, p.148; Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 1966, repr. 1970), p.1.

<sup>346</sup> Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.153.

<sup>347</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.105.

<sup>348</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.106.

<sup>349</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.106.

For Eustacia, the heath is 'my cross, my misery' and, as she foresees, 'my death' (*RN*, p.82). Lost on the wildest of nights, the mood of the heath matches her own all too perfectly: 'never was harmony more perfect than that between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without' (*RN*, p.358). But those who search for her that night have a very different relationship to the heath. One of the searchers is Clym, who is of course 'permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odours' (he 'might be said to be its product') (*RN*, p.175). Thomasin, however, is another. Her knowledge of the district is 'scarcely surpassed by Clym's' and, setting out with her baby, she thinks of Egdon only as a 'windy wet place, in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care, and possibly catch cold' (*RN*, p.368, p.367-8).

To her there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground. (*RN*, p.367)

The searchers are, however, unsuccessful. When the storm is spent, Eustacia is found drowned, perhaps by accident, perhaps by her own hand. In any case, she is a victim not of the heath, but of her hubristic refusal to reconcile herself to it. Confronted by a place over which 'her power was limited', she can no more endure the heath than she can 'Nature' ('I hate her already') (*RN*, p.64, p.187). As the narrator remarks, 'to dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue' (*RN*, p.67-8).

And yet, just as Clym is more than a 'native', so Eustacia is entrapped by a contrary relationship to the heath, which she has often wandered freely, often at night: 'she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto'; conscious and unconscious responses war against each other, fuelling her 'smouldering rebelliousness' (*RN*, p.64).

Eustacia's complicated and conflicted attitude towards the environment over which she feels superior, but to which she is ultimately subject, is entirely modern: it is an aspect of our own 'compromised, contemporary' situation, and of a predicament so eloquently articulated by the eminent biologist E. O. Wilson:<sup>350</sup>

If there is a danger in the human trajectory, it is not so much in the survival of our own species as in the fulfilment of the ultimate irony of organic evolution: that in the instant of achieving self-understanding through the mind of man, life has doomed its most beautiful creations.<sup>351</sup>

The next section of the Chapter returns the focus to Hardy's Wessex, and re-evaluates it from an eco-critical perspective.

### **'Wessex' Revisited**

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<sup>350</sup> 'We can only start from the premise that all of us – critics and writers, readers and non-readers – are differentially caught up in the (global) economy and culture of the present'; Ryle, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.11-23 (p.19).

<sup>351</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.328. First published 1992.

When, in 1912, Hardy came to revise his novels for the Wessex Edition, he classed *Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders* amongst nine 'Novels of Character and Environment'.<sup>352</sup> Hardy did not, of course, use the word 'environment' as it might be used today, to signal concern at the way in which we influence and affect it; he was interested in the way it influences us. He referred to the likely influence of a given situation or set of circumstances on a particular individual. Nevertheless, his decision to use the word 'environment' is a telling one. The word is a nineteenth-century invention, and its emergence, Bate argues, coincides with a growing feeling of estrangement, of displacement, which Bate links to urbanisation, and the increasingly widespread experience of city life.<sup>353</sup> But whilst this feeling of alienation registers in Hardy's novels, it is not necessarily connected to life in the city. As we saw in the case of Grace, Fitzpiers, Felice, and Eustacia, their estrangement is not so much a response to city life as it is a response to the lack of it: their restlessness reflects their transplantation to an environment (Wessex) where they do not feel at home or no longer feel at home. It is rather their exposure to modern ways of thinking and living that unsettles them, as the case of Clym demonstrates: the native returns, but he is no longer a native. (Ironically, much the same can be said of Hardy himself, who returned to his native Dorset only to live out the rest of his life in Dorchester's suburbs, symbolically stranded between town and country.) Giles' tragic end can also be seen in these terms. The quintessential woodlander, he is perfectly attuned to his environment, yet he nonetheless catches a fatal chill because, in deference to what we might now regard as a mere social nicety, he spends a wet night out of doors to protect Grace's reputation.

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<sup>352</sup> General Preface, *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.44.

<sup>353</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.13-14.

The predicament of characters such as these suggests that, for Hardy, the problem is not where we live, but the changing nature of our relationship to place. He makes this explicit in his article on 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'. The fact that rural workers seek a better life in the city is less important than the fact that, in doing so, they abandon a long-standing and settled relationship with the land. As he points out, 'a result of this increasing nomadic habit of the labourer is naturally a less intimate and kindly relation with the land': 'they have lost touch with their environment, and that sense of long local participancy'.<sup>354</sup>

This is, perhaps, why Hardy's novels resist any simplistic categorisation as a pastoral account of country life written at the expense of its city equivalent. From an eco-critical perspective, a novel like *The Woodlanders* can be so interpreted, and with good reason, but as I have also suggested, Hardy's emphasis on the hardship of life for characters like Marty makes it quite clear why the rural poor were so willing to trade an apparently settled and sustainable life for one that offered in its stead the material benefits of a better 'standard of living', no matter how narrowly defined.<sup>355</sup> As Bate also and rightly points out, the issue is this 'loss of place', and 'no writer had a deeper sense of that loss than Thomas Hardy'.<sup>356</sup> Most importantly, Hardy's dawning awareness of this loss – his awareness of this feeling of displacement – shaped his own fiction, and his use of it. Above all, it underpinned a growing recognition of the importance of 'Wessex'.

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<sup>354</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.181, p.182.

<sup>355</sup> This is an issue with which modern environmentalists are still wrestling, as the relative failure of the UN climate change conference at Copenhagen in 2009 once again demonstrated: when what is at stake is an end to a poverty-stricken life of great hardship, why should the poor prioritize an abstract concept like 'the environment' over their own pressing and most basic needs?

<sup>356</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.13.

As I have pointed out, Hardy did not use the word 'Wessex' until his fourth published novel, and then only once, but by the time of the 'First Uniform and Complete Edition' of his work, published by Osgood, McIlvaine & Co between 1895-6, all the novels had become 'Wessex Novels'.<sup>357</sup> There was more to this than sound business sense. As Gatrell explains in some detail, the gradual development and increasing prominence of 'Wessex' reflects Hardy's growing sense that this 'complex social and environmental organisation' was in some way vanishing.<sup>358</sup>

Gatrell's description of Wessex as a 'homogenous historical object' – his insistence that it forms a 'cultural whole' – points to the reason Hardy's fictional construct has such eco-critical significance.<sup>359</sup> In simple terms, Hardy's complex and compelling creation anticipates the modern concept of the bioregion, or, as Bate puts in 'Poetry and Biodiversity', 'a self-sustaining, self-sufficient natural *oikos*'.<sup>360</sup> It can be argued, of course, that a bioregion is necessarily structured around 'natural' boundaries, which 'Wessex' is not: regardless of its age, it is a construct imposed on the region by humankind, rather than the consequence of a natural dynamic. Nonetheless, this depends on what we mean by 'natural'. If we insist that the natural does not include the species called 'human', we too insist on the duality that eco-critics foreground as part of the environmental problem; and there can be no such thing as a bioregion whose shape is not in some way imposed by human interaction and intervention. Unless we maintain that there is (or has ever been) such a thing as a pristine wilderness untouched by

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<sup>357</sup> Purdy, p.279.

<sup>358</sup> Simon Gatrell, 'Wessex', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.19-37 (p.19).

<sup>359</sup> Simon Gatrell, 'Wessex', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.19-37 (p.31).

<sup>360</sup> Jonathan Bate, 'Poetry and Biodiversity', in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, pp.53-70 (p.54).

humankind, any bioregion will bear a human imprint; its boundaries will reflect an evolving accommodation between the biotic and abiotic elements within it, rather than an identity artificially imposed from without. By this token, Hardy's insistence on returning to the region an older interpretation of its size and scale suggests something more profound than the simple desire to sketch out an imaginary landscape on which to superimpose his own fictional creations: it suggests a conscious respect for a slow, silent process that has taken centuries, involved countless generations, and which flows directly from the interactions between and the involvement of every element within an eco-system. To quote from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

Thus, Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, focus, or nerve knot of the surrounding country life; differing from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plain, in a green world with which they have nothing in common.<sup>361</sup>

This Wessex throws into sharp relief the changes which had already brought railroad and telegraph to Dorset, and in which we can glimpse our own, globalised existence. It was, in Hardy's words, a 'modern Wessex of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union workhouses, Lucifer matches, labourers who read and write, and National school children.'<sup>362</sup> These remarks in turn reflect Hardy's own

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<sup>361</sup> *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, New Wessex Edition, p.92.

<sup>362</sup> Preface (1912) to the Wessex Edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.9.

status as a 'participant who is also an observer'.<sup>363</sup> But it also points to another way in which 'Wessex' resists any simple comparison with the kind of pastoral writing so many critics associate with the 'literature of the land' that sprang up during the second half of the nineteenth century. Whenever it is written, the pastoral always looks back to a just vanished past; this was one of Williams' most important insights, and one to which later eco-critics refer in their own discussions.<sup>364</sup> This is also the language that Hardy uses, when in the 'General Preface' to the Wessex Edition he talks of his desire to 'preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life'.<sup>365</sup> But Hardy's nostalgia is of a very different order, rooted as it is in a long, historical perspective that emphasises the magnitude of change that British society was then experiencing. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the change to which Hardy responded was every bit as complete as his turn of phrase suggests. A way of life was indeed vanishing. During his own lifetime, the vast majority of his countrymen ceased to live in the country. This was a change as momentous as the first great transition in human history, when humans slowly abandoned their wandering way of life as hunter-gatherers, and settled on the land. The second great transition, however, has taken just a few hundred, not thousands of years: little more than a century and a half after Britain became the first predominantly urban society in the world, the greater part of the global population lives in cities.

Hardy's feeling for this process of displacement may help to explain his continuing significance as a novelist, and the continuing importance of 'Wessex', a term

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<sup>363</sup> Williams, *The English Novel*, p.110.

<sup>364</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.35; Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.9; Garrard, p.37.

<sup>365</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.46.



he first used by chance, but then built on to create a complex and compelling depiction of a (bio)region within which 'personal and communal identity were intimately related to physical setting'.<sup>366</sup> Ultimately, however, Hardy came to believe that his novel writing was compromised by the constraints of the form and by the expectations of his audience, expectations that, increasingly, he was unwilling and unable to satisfy. With the critical backlash against *Jude*, Hardy abandoned novels for a form that would provide him with a more flexible and open medium less tied to the needs of his readers: he returned to writing, and began publishing, his poetry. This is the focus of the Chapters that follow.

Before concluding this discussion of Hardy's fiction, however, it is important to note that his novels and poetry overlap, sharing subjects and themes and the same basis in 'Wessex'. In some cases, furthermore, the poetry draws directly on the novels. Several poems are based on *The Woodlanders*, including 'The Pine Planters (Marty South's Reverie)' (CP225), and one in particular derives from its singularly bleak and unremitting vision of an environment where 'the leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy strangled to death the promising sapling' (*TW*, p.52). The poem is called 'In a Wood' (CP40), and the analysis of it that follows concludes this Chapter, and points to the direction of those that follow.

### **'In a Wood': The Transition from Novels to Poetry**

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<sup>366</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.13.

Dated both 1887 and 1896, 'In a Wood' appeared in the first of Hardy's verse collections, *Wessex Poems* (1898). In the poem, a 'City-oppressed' narrator – perhaps Hardy had Fitzpiers in mind – seeks 'sylvan peace' (l.13) amidst the trees.<sup>367</sup> Wooed by a Wordsworthian faith in a nature that 'never did betray' the 'heart that loved her', the narrator hopes for 'a soft release' (l.14) from 'men's unrest' (l.15).<sup>368</sup> Instead, he finds a scene reminiscent of the novel's description of trees 'wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows' (*TW*, p.311). He finds a vision of 'Nature' that is anything but 'ordered, purposive, benign'.<sup>369</sup>

Sycamore shoulders oak,  
Bines the slim sapling yoke,  
Ivy-spun halters choke  
Elms stout and tall.

Touches from ash, O wych,  
Sting you like scorn!  
You, too, brave hollies twitch  
Sidelong from thorn.

(ll.21-28)

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<sup>367</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.22.

<sup>368</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', ll.123-124, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.243.

<sup>369</sup> Bernard Richards, *English Poetry of the Victorian Period, 1830-90*, 2nd edn, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Pearson, 2001), p.154.

Disconcerted, the narrator finds that there is no more peace to be found in this Darwinian 'war of nature' than in the human society from which he has fled.<sup>370</sup> Both worlds are ruled by conflict and competition and are, like the narrator, self-interested; trees are 'to men akin –/ Combatants all!' (ll.19-20)

Like 'The Ivy-Wife' (CP33), another of the poems in Hardy's first collection, 'In a Wood' therefore consciously inverts the image of nature as stable and serene. Where (in 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey') Wordsworth saw in nature 'quietness and beauty', Hardy's narrator sees open warfare. Conversely, where Wordsworth saw in human company only 'the sneers of selfish men', Hardy's narrator can at least see 'smiles'; and so he reverses the trajectory of *The Prelude*, and turns 'back to my kind' (l.35).<sup>371</sup> 'Back to Nature' becomes back to the city, because:

There, now and then, are found

Life-loyalties.

(ll.39-40)

For those of 'spirit lame' (l.9), this 'now and then' may seem an insubstantial comfort, but perhaps that is the poem's plain-speaking strength. In denying the Romantic opposition between nature as 'nurse and guide' and the man-made 'bondage' of 'yon city's walls', it also dismisses the Neoclassical insistence on 'Nature' as a necessary and fixed 'link' in the chain of 'general order' that binds each to his or her place within

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<sup>370</sup> Darwin, p.459.

<sup>371</sup> 'Tintern Abbey', l.128, l.130, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.243.

human society.<sup>372</sup> 'In A Wood' makes no concessions to Wordsworth or Pope. Instead, it draws a parallel between natural and human environments, and portrays each as hostile and highly competitive.

Writing towards the end of a period shaped by the successive scientific shocks that culminated in *The Origin of Species*, Hardy's poem was not the first to point out that parallel. By then, it was acceptable, if not conventional, to side with Herbert Spencer in seeing biological struggle as a scientific endorsement of 'industrial competition and imperial expansion': these were the natural and inevitable consequences of a universe re-imagined by science and re-shaped by free trade.<sup>373</sup> But as others were at pains to point out, the 'survival of the fittest' assumes a moral dimension where there is none.<sup>374</sup> Nature is neither cruel nor kind, but as Hardy observed, 'an indifferent and unconscious force at the back of things "that neither good nor evil knows" (LW, p.364).

In other words, Hardy's own views differ from those of his (very Victorian) narrator. In the poem, the speaker imagines nature benign, and finds it hostile; the same speaker who thinks to find in nature a place of 'sylvan peace' instead encounters a gladiatorial arena in which trees shoulder, sting and choke each other,

Cankering in black despair

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<sup>372</sup> Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 – 1870* (London: Yale University Press, 1957), p.68; *The Prelude*, I, l.7 in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.284; Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle I ('Of the Nature and State of Man, With Respect to the Universe'), Argument, VIII, cited at *Poet's Corner* <<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/pope-e1.html#l1>> [accessed 6 April 2010].

<sup>373</sup> Gilmour, p.133.

<sup>374</sup> T. H. Huxley went further. The practice of 'that which is ethically best', he said in a lecture on 'Evolution and Ethics' in 1893, 'involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence': 'let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.' *The Essence of T. H. Huxley*, ed. by Cyril Bibby (London: Macmillan, 1967), p.173.

If overborne.

(ll.31-32)

Given Hardy's remarks about nature's 'indifference', it is clear that this response is no less exaggerated and artificial than the narrator's first – and that, perhaps, is the point of Hardy's self-reflexive poem. In effect, it parodies the positions his novels deftly circumnavigate through their recognition that neither pastoral nor anti-pastoral visions attempts an *objective* translation of environment realities. Thus, 'In a Wood' becomes a poem about literary conventions or tropes, but also, a wider critique of the Victorian's deeply anthropocentric insistence that 'Nature' act as some kind of extended metaphor for the human condition. To quote Darwin, it 'is difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature'.<sup>375</sup> But in the words of Thomas Hardy, the 'poetry' of a scene 'varies with the minds of the perceivers': 'indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all' (*LW*, p.52).

That recognition makes Hardy's position virtually unique amongst contemporaries: in stepping beyond this projection of human needs onto the environment, and accepting 'Nature as a process governed by Chance', he makes 'a complete tabula rasa of Christian and Idealistic values'.<sup>376</sup> In the world of 'In a Wood', then, nature is no longer magical, but mechanical; stripped of the divine, it ceases to be a source of solace or spiritual strength. There is a telling corollary: if in this universe God does not exist, then there is no special place for man within that universe, and nothing to differentiate him from any other creature. As Hardy realised, Darwin had, in

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<sup>375</sup> Quoted in James Eli Adams, 'Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin', *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1989), 6-27 (p.7).

<sup>376</sup> Georg Roppen, *Evolution and Poetic Belief: A Study in Some Victorian and Modern Writers* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1956), p.315.

distancing or dismissing God, also dissolved the 'traditional distinction between mankind and nature': and if the narrator of 'In A Wood' instinctively recoils from the reality of the environment he encounters, it is, perhaps, because nothing now separates him from the natural world he is so accustomed to patronising.<sup>377</sup> Once again, the distinction between self and place has collapsed. In the words of one of Hardy's final published poems, 'Drinking Song' (CP896), narrator and narrated are alike, after all:

We are all one with creeping things  
And Apes and men  
Blood-brethren,  
And likewise reptile forms with stings

(ll.49-52)

This shift in attitude resonates through Hardy's poems, and it is a measure of how far we have come from 'the old Bucolic fallacy', as Blunden characterised 'common notions' of Hardy.<sup>378</sup> It also suggests why, in all its considerable variety, Hardy's poetry might reward an alternative, eco-critical analysis. That is the aim of the Chapters that follow.

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<sup>377</sup> Gilmour, p.84.

<sup>378</sup> Edmund Blunden, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1942, repr. 1967), p.76.

# Chapter 4

## *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*

### Introduction

Chapter 4 extends the eco-critical analysis to Hardy's poetry, focusing in particular on his first collection of verse. The Chapter has six sections. 'Hardy's Poetry: Critical Responses and Eco-critical Approaches' discusses the way in which critics have responded to Hardy's verse since his death, and explains in greater detail what is meant by an 'eco-critical approach'. The second section, 'An Introduction to *Wessex Poems*', outlines contemporary reactions to this first collection, and introduces Hardy's own view or concept of 'Nature'. This is a discussion developed in the third section, 'Hardy and Science', which examines the way in which Hardy responded to the influence of contemporary scientific discoveries, and how that in turned informed his poetry. The fourth section, 'Hardy's Godless Universe', discusses Hardy's loss of faith, and his response to a natural world that could no longer be read for signs of God's existence. In the penultimate section, 'The Limits of Reason in *Wessex Poems*', it is nevertheless made clear that Hardy was a reluctant rationalist, and his poems sometimes suggest that neither the universe nor our relationship to it is entirely explicable in those terms.

This in turn leads to a discussion of 'People and Place in *Wessex Poems*', and Hardy's continuing insistence on the powerful links that bind us to our environment.

### **Hardy's Poetry: Critical Responses and Eco-critical Approaches**

Hardy was fond of quoting those writers and composers who, like Verdi, enjoyed a 'phoenix-like' second career, and writing poetry became his.<sup>379</sup> His publishing career as a poet was longer than his career as a novelist, and no less productive. Furthermore, his verse was the mature product of a mature writer: 'I was quick to bloom', he remarked in 1917, 'late to ripen' (*LW*, p.408).

The value of old age depends upon the person who reaches it. To some men of early performance it is useless. To others, who are late to develop, it just enables them to complete their job. (*LW*, p.435)

According to the posthumously published *Life*, Hardy always believed that 'in verse was concentrated the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature', and he took up novel writing only 'under the stress of necessity' (*LW*, p.51, p.58): 'Thomas Hardy was always a person with an unconscious, or rather unreasoning, *tendency*, and the poetic

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<sup>379</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.3. Armstrong relates his remark to Hardy's literary notes, in which he dwells on the career of that 'amazing old man', Verdi; see entries 2309 and 2310, *LN2*, p.184-5.



tendency had been his from the earliest' (LW, p.415). If this is, as Zietlow suggests, 'a myth of retrospective self-justification', it was one Hardy himself came to believe.<sup>380</sup>

Despite Hardy's high opinion of verse as a superior art form, however, critical interest in his own poetry has developed only slowly.<sup>381</sup> Although Hardy the poet 'never lacked followers' during his lifetime, critical opinion was, after his death, divided.<sup>382</sup> Modernists did not seem to know what (if anything) to make of him. F. R. Leavis' response is in some ways typical. 'Hardy is a naïve poet of simple attitudes and outlook', he remarked dismissively, adding that 'there was little in his technique that could be taken up by younger poets'.<sup>383</sup> Other writers were scarcely more sympathetic. Rutland, for example, maintained that 'the poetry is in the nature of a commentary to the novels'.<sup>384</sup>

A second, more positive phase was inaugurated by the 'Thomas Hardy Centennial Issue' of the *Southern Review* (1940), to which W. H. Auden contributed a landmark article in which he 'recorded his indebtedness to Hardy for his own education

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<sup>380</sup> Zietlow, p.42. Zietlow's remark draws obvious attention to the limitation of *The Life* as a source. *The Life* is in effect an autobiography masquerading as biography, through which Hardy hoped to secure his reputation whilst keeping his secrets, and it is highly selective. However, *The Life* is not the only means of constructing some sense of Hardy's approach to life and literature. His letters fill seven volumes; surviving literary, architectural, and personal notebooks fill several more; assorted essays, prefaces, miscellaneous prose, and public pronouncements have been carefully collected; all have been the subject of recent and exacting scholarship. Nevertheless, and as Millgate, remarks, *The Life* remains 'beyond question a uniquely valuable source'. Michael Millgate, 'Thomas Hardy: the biographical sources', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.1-18 (p.3). *The Life* was originally published under the name of Hardy's second wife, Florence; I have instead used Millgate's reconstructed version, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, which reinstates material that Florence removed after Hardy's death and before publication.

<sup>381</sup> For the account that follows, see, in particular Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.190-197.

<sup>382</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.41.

<sup>383</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings*, p.47. Famously, Leavis added that Hardy's status as a major poet rested on just 'a dozen poems' lost 'among a vast bulk of verse interesting only by its oddity and idiosyncrasy' (p.48).

<sup>384</sup> W. R. Rutland, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of his Writings and their Background* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938), p.264.

in matters of poetic technique.<sup>385</sup> Ezra Pound was another, if unlikely enthusiast: as he remarked, 'many clever people have overlooked Thomas Hardy's verses'.<sup>386</sup> In the middle years of the twentieth century, however, criticism of the verse remained occasional and infrequent. The 'first thorough-going study' did not appear until 1961, when Hynes published *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*.<sup>387</sup> In fact, Hynes' own response was distinctly lukewarm. 'Hardy probably wrote more – surely he preserved more – bad poems than any other important poet of our time', he remarked.<sup>388</sup> Remarks such as these did, however, prompt an unashamedly partisan Philip Larkin to 'trumpet the assurance that one reader at least' considered Hardy's *Collected Poems* 'as many times over the best body of poetic work this century so far has to show'.<sup>389</sup>

Larkin's enthusiastic endorsement anticipated – perhaps encouraged – a third phase of Hardy scholarship. Over the next decade, there was a surge of interest in his verse. *Agenda* devoted an issue to Hardy's poetry in 1972, and between 1969 and 1977, Marsden published a critical introduction, Bailey and Pinion produced commentaries, and Zietlow, Paulin, and Richardson all published full-length studies.<sup>390</sup> But the best known and most polemically engaged of these works is, undoubtedly, Donald Davie's *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), which opens with the assertion that, 'in British poetry of the last fifty years', the most 'far-reaching influence,

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<sup>385</sup> Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.190.

<sup>386</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p.193.

<sup>387</sup> See Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.190; Samuel Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961, repr. 1966).

<sup>388</sup> Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.4.

<sup>389</sup> Philip Larkin's article, 'Wanted: Good Hardy Critic', is reprinted in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp.168-174 (p.174).

<sup>390</sup> Marsden, Bailey, Pinion, Zietlow, and Paulin have already been cited, but note that I have used Paulin's second edition (1986) throughout.

for good and ill, has not been Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, not Lawrence, but *Hardy*.<sup>391</sup>

A steady flow of scholarship followed that flush of interest in the 1970s, including two important works by Taylor.<sup>392</sup> Nonetheless, it remains a moot point whether Hardy's poetry can now be considered well served by critics in general, if not by eco-critics in particular; the fact seems to remain that, even today, critical interest in Hardy's poetry is secondary to interest in his prose. 'The lack of a good critical tradition for Hardy's poetry has long been a puzzle', Taylor noted in trying to address that very problem, and as Widdowson (one of the most critically aware of commentators) remarked more recently, Hardy's poetry 'has not had a very satisfactory critical press'.<sup>393</sup>

That puzzle may in part be explained by the fact that, as Armstrong remarks, many critics struggle to position Hardy within a literary tradition that he nowhere seems to fit.<sup>394</sup> Kramer's companion, for example, pairs Riquelme's account of Hardy's poetic modernity with Taylor's discussion of Hardy as a nineteenth century poet. But the two are not mutually exclusive: 'Hardy is, surely, a genuinely transitional figure, a poet who stands self-consciously between one world and another, declaring his allegiances to the past but fascinated by the speed of its replacement.'<sup>395</sup>

In part, this is why Hardy's poetry is of interest to the eco-critic. It provides a unique insight into a period of pivotal importance in human history. Intellectually voracious and highly inquisitive, Hardy was deeply responsive to the ideas of the day.

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<sup>391</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.3.

<sup>392</sup> I have already cited Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*; see also *Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>393</sup> Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*, p.xviii; *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. by Peter Widdowson (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.186.

<sup>394</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.42.

<sup>395</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.42.

Both Davie and Widdowson point to the exchange of influences between Hardy and his social and cultural milieu, and as Armstrong remarks of 'Nature's Questioning' (CP43), one of the first of his published poems, it 'reflects Hardy's engagement with a range of nineteenth-century thought on progress, religion, and the nature of creation'.<sup>396</sup>

This is not to say that Hardy simply transposes contemporary ideas into verse: to quote Schweik, 'elements of contemporary thought in Hardy's works tend to be embedded in a densely intricate web of imaginative connections and qualifications'.<sup>397</sup> Furthermore, Hardy's verse is often purely personal: in the words of *The Life*, 'there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr. Hardy's poetry than in all the novels' (*LW*, p.425). Nonetheless, Hardy clearly felt that poetry provided him with a covert means of saying what could not be said decently in prose. As he remarked in 1896, 'perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion – hard as a rock – which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting': 'If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved,' the entry concludes, 'the Inquisition might have let him alone' (*LW*, p.302).

Thus, poetry allowed Hardy the freedom to respond more fully to the intellectual debates from which his own often idiosyncratic opinions distantly derive. And whilst Hardy refused the role so self-consciously accepted by Tennyson, he did write poems for public occasions, for example during the Boer War (and later the First World War), on the death of the Queen, and on the loss of the Titanic, perhaps under a growing

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<sup>396</sup> Davie takes it 'for granted that works of literary art are conditioned by economic and social forces active in the society from which those works spring', and which in turn have 'an effect in moulding the political actions and sentiments' of those who read them; Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.1. See also *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.67.

<sup>397</sup> Robert Schweik, 'The influence of religion, science, and philosophy on Hardy's writings', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.54-72 (p.54).

sense of public obligation. The increasingly appreciative reception of *The Dynasts* in particular suggests Hardy's national status, confirmed by conferment of the Order of Merit by the King in 1910, and his establishment as 'a kind of national laureate'; *The Life*, begun around 1917, may in part be seen as a reflection of this growing status.<sup>398</sup> Indeed, the General Preface of 1912 does imagine the poetry as part of 'a fairly comprehensive cycle':

I had wished that those [poems] in dramatic, ballad, and narrative form should include most of the cardinal situations which occur in social and public life, and those in lyric form a round of emotional experiences of some completeness.<sup>399</sup>

The result was, as I pointed out in the Introduction, a very large body of work. Over a thirty-year period, Hardy published eight verse collections containing nearly a thousand poems, a three-volume verse-drama, *The Dynasts*, and a now more or less forgotten verse play, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*. Most readers have therefore fallen back on selections of the poetry, and Hardy's verse has been the subject of a great many. His own was one of the first (1916), but a short list might include G.M. Young (1940), Wain (1966), Creighton (1974), Wright (1978), Hynes (1984), Widdowson (1997), and Tomalin (2006).<sup>400</sup> Whilst the *Collected Poems* has

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<sup>398</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.3.

<sup>399</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.49-50.

<sup>400</sup> Hardy's *Selected Poems* was published in the Golden Treasury series (London: Macmillan, 1916); see also *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by G. M. Young (London: Macmillan, 1940), *Selected Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by John Wain (London: Macmillan, 1966), *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry*, ed. by David Wright (London: Penguin, 1978), *Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and *The Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Claire Tomalin (London: Penguin, 2006). Creighton and Widdowson have already been cited.

always remained in print, it is through selections like these that Hardy's poetry is generally known. Traditionally, these selections were made on the basis that most of the poetry was not, in any case, worth reading: Larkin might not have wished the *Collected Poems* 'a single page shorter', but he was an outspoken exception in a field where, as recently as 1993, one selection blithely recycled Empson's opinion, dating from 1940, that 'a working selection from Hardy's mass of bad poetry is much needed'.<sup>401</sup>

The 'bewildering abundance' of Hardy's verse remains a problem, even in a thesis that focuses only on the verse and verse drama published between 1898 and 1909.<sup>402</sup> Some further form of (eco-critical) selection is needed. One criterion has already been discussed in Chapter 1. As Greg Garrard explains, eco-criticism tends to focus on a handful of themes or 'tropes'.<sup>403</sup> These include (but are not limited to) concepts or categories such as 'pollution', 'apocalypse', and 'wilderness'. 'Dwelling', or the long-term engagement with what Garrard calls 'a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work', has been discussed in Chapter 1, whilst another trope, 'pastoral', has been discussed at length in Chapter 3.<sup>404</sup> Garrard also discusses the presentation and treatment of animals, another trope of particular importance to a study of Hardy's poetry.

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<sup>401</sup> Larkin, pp.168-174 (p.174); Empson, quoted in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*, ed. by Harry Thomas (London: Penguin, 1993), p.xii. Empson's remarks were made in a *New Statesman* review (1940) of G. M. Young's selection of the same year, a review reproduced in William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Hogarth, 1987, repr. 1988), p.421.

<sup>402</sup> Rutland, p.265.

<sup>403</sup> Garrard, p.7.

<sup>404</sup> Garrard, p.108.

If we wish to identify what might be meant by an 'environmentally oriented work', however, Garrard's is only one of several approaches.<sup>405</sup> Two others warrant specific mention. The first is Buell's 'rough checklist' (1995) for an environmentally (self-)aware literature.<sup>406</sup> The second is Gifford's concept of 'green thought', outlined in *Pastoral* (1999), and developed in 'Towards a Post-Pastoral View of British Poetry' (2002).<sup>407</sup>

Buell takes as a starting point the unexceptionable assertion that an environmentally oriented literature presents the nonhuman environment 'not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.'<sup>408</sup> It follows that 'the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest'; indeed, 'human accountability to the environment' should form 'part of the text's ethical orientation'.<sup>409</sup> In addition, there should be 'some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant.'<sup>410</sup> (My discussion of Hardy's novels makes it amply clear that is an important aspect of Hardy's creative vision.)

Buell's measured and careful proposal may be contrasted with Gifford's engaged and passionate espousal of what he calls 'post-pastoral poetry', which he describes in terms of six key features.<sup>411</sup> A first feature of this kind of poetry is that its response to the environment should be characterised by an awe that leads, not to complacency, but to humility.<sup>412</sup> Secondly, there should be a recognition that the universe is continually written and rewritten by the 'circular dynamic' of creation and destruction, birth and

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<sup>405</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.7.

<sup>406</sup> See Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.7-8.

<sup>407</sup> Gifford, 'Towards a Post-Pastoral View of British Poetry', in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, pp.58-63 (p.58).

<sup>408</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.7.

<sup>409</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.7.

<sup>410</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.8.

<sup>411</sup> Gifford, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.62.

<sup>412</sup> Gifford, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.58.

death, a master narrative that links 'genes to galaxies'.<sup>413</sup> This in turn should lead to, thirdly, a recognition that this dynamic shapes our own inner lives, and fourthly, a parallel recognition that the inner life we express through culture is itself natural: 'poetry is not thinking about nature, but nature thinking'.<sup>414</sup> Gifford's fifth feature lies with a recognition that alienation need not be the necessary consequence of consciousness; we have the opportunity to exercise choice, and choose responsibly. Finally, in realising that we remain embedded in the biosphere, a 'post-pastoral poetry' will reflect on the fact that 'crimes against humanity are crimes against nature', and 'crimes against nature are crimes against humanity', an insight that fuses the concerns of both social ecologist and ecofeminist.<sup>415</sup>

Whilst useful, eco-criticism's continuing diversification indicates an obvious problem with these focused approaches. As Buell remarked some ten years after setting out his checklist, environmental criticism is now better understood 'less as a monolith than as a concourse of discrepant practices'.<sup>416</sup> Consensus is elusive, and only ever temporary. We should not, however, lose sight of the fundamental message shared by both Buell and Gifford and widely reflected in eco-critical discourse: that we are a part of and not apart from the environment, and bound to it in a constantly shifting relationship that shapes and overshadows all others. This in turn fits with the overall orientation of a thesis whose roots lie in Deep Ecology, with its emphasis on 'organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations'.<sup>417</sup> My basis for selection is

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<sup>413</sup> Gifford, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.58, p.57.

<sup>414</sup> Gifford, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.60.

<sup>415</sup> Gifford, in *The Environmental Tradition*, ed. by Parham, p.62.

<sup>416</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.11.

<sup>417</sup> Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep', 95-100 (p.95).



therefore broad but straightforward: I am concerned with any poem that reflects on humankind's relationship to its environment.

It follows that, in selecting and highlighting only those poems that reflect on our relationship to the environment, I risk creating the impression of a radical 'new' Hardy whose existence has hitherto been unsuspected by the reading community. That is not the aim of the thesis, nor its likely outcome. Hardy is not an 'environmentalist', and Hardy would not have been familiar with the politicised way in which the word is often used today.<sup>418</sup> Furthermore, and whilst the concept of conservation was discussed during his lifetime, Hardy's interest in it did not extend much beyond an association with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (founded in 1877), to which a letter of 29 November 1890 testifies, and the occasional letter in support of specific campaigns: in 1901, for example, *The Life* records a reply to 'an inquirer as to the preservation of the prospect from Richmond Hill'.<sup>419</sup> Hardy is better thought of as a liberal humanist whose views and values, although advanced, are recognizably Victorian, but whose wide-ranging interests and sensitivity nonetheless allow for a distinctive and meaningful (if occasional) response to humankind's interaction with the environment. His verse reflects the fact: most are anthropocentric in focus.

This notwithstanding, it is important not to rule out the possibility of some kind of development in Hardy's poetry. It is equally important to acknowledge the possibility of sometimes subtle and allusive connections between Hardy's poetry and the changing

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<sup>418</sup> The words 'ecology' and 'environment' are nineteenth century in origin, but what might be called their 'political derivations' date from the second half of the twentieth century: it was not until 1963, for example, that Aldous Huxley talked of the 'politics of ecology'; see J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

<sup>419</sup> *SL*, p.59-60, *LW*, p.332.

shape and nature of his world. I have therefore chosen to consider each of his works of verse and verse drama in turn and in order of publication. The first of those publications was, of course, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, and this is the principal focus of the Chapter.

### **An Introduction to *Wessex Poems***

Hardy was cautious about the publication of *Wessex Poems* (CP2-52). He kept quiet about its creation, and expected little by way of success. At a time when 'a cheap paperback of *Tess* sold 100,000 copies in a year', only 500 copies were printed; and Hardy was right to be diffident.<sup>420</sup> The collection sold slowly, and 'no reprint was called for until 1903.'<sup>421</sup>

The public's response was, perhaps, predictable. For reviewers and readers alike, the collection represented a sudden and unsettling change of direction from a well-known and still popular novelist. The nature of Hardy's verse was a further surprise. It owed little to the example of his predecessors, and rather less to that of contemporaries, at a time when (Hardy wrote) 'the full tide of fashion seems to view poetry as the art of saying nothing with mellifluous preciousness'.<sup>422</sup> His tone was, by comparison, and as E. K. Chambers sympathetically remarked, 'strenuous, austere,

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<sup>420</sup> Trevor Johnson, in *WP*, p.11.

<sup>421</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.12. Hardy's verse collections nonetheless grew in popularity, and his penultimate collection, *Human Shows*, was published in an edition of 5,000, which almost immediately sold out; Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.255.

<sup>422</sup> Letter to Edmund Gosse, dated 27 December 1898, in *CL2*, p.208.

forcible'.<sup>423</sup> Hardy's diction was (and remains) challenging, whilst the collection as a whole represents a dizzying display of technical virtuosity: Johnson records one couplet, three triplets, sixteen quatrains, four quintets, four sestets, one septet, nine octets, ten sonnets (of which nine are Petrarchan and the tenth Shakespearian), one Sapphic, one Ghazal, and one irregular.<sup>424</sup> As Millgate remarks, *Wessex Poems* drew on 'the entire range' of poetry Hardy had written to date.<sup>425</sup>

Nonetheless, reviews were generally respectful, suggesting that Hardy had been right to see poetry as a safer medium through which to communicate opinions that some might otherwise have considered incendiary:

To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel – which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries – will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing... (*LW*, p.302)

In one very important respect, however, Hardy's first verse collection did not deviate from the pattern established by his novels. As its title suggests, rural scenes and textures predominate. So do rural illustrations; of the 31 'boldly emblematic

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<sup>423</sup> E. K. Chambers, *Athenaeum*, 14 January, 1899, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.327.

<sup>424</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.23.

<sup>425</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.363.

drawings' Hardy drew for the collection, nine show country scenes and a further four show churches set amidst trees or in the countryside, whilst only three drawings show urban scenes of any kind.<sup>426</sup> Of the poems, only the penultimate, 'Lines' (CP51) refers directly to city-life. Since it was written for performance at a fund-raising event in support of a holiday fund for 'poor city children', it is no surprise that the poem subscribes to attitudes that were by then entirely conventional, contrasting 'urban murk to paradise' (l.38):<sup>427</sup>

The down, the cornland, and the stretching green –  
Space – the child's heaven: scenes which at least ensure  
Some palliative for ill they cannot cure.

(ll.32-34)

The poem's place of composition, annotated as the 'Savile Club', nonetheless highlights what is, for an eco-critic, an interesting aspect of Hardy's life and work: his relationship (and response) to the city. Country born, Hardy sought and found his fortune in London, only to leave it permanently (1883) at a time when many others who were equally well off were also beginning their retreat to leafy suburbs and beyond. And whilst Hardy seldom missed a season until late in life ('several months of each spring and summer were to be spent in London during the ensuing twenty years'), *The Life* everywhere testifies to the ambivalence of his feelings about the city (*LW*, p.167). Pride

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<sup>426</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.12.

<sup>427</sup> The words 'poor city children' form part of the manuscript's explanatory sub-title; when published, the word 'poor' was deleted; see *CPW1*, p.104, p.105.

in his familiarity with London (*LW*, p.64) and with his status as a 'London man' (*LW*, p.125) jostles with a low opinion of its effect on his health (*LW*, p.54, p.154) and a still lower opinion of what might then (1884) have been referred to as the 'lower orders':

Rural low life may reveal coarseness of considerable leaven; but that libidinousness which makes the scum of cities so noxious is not usually there. (*LW*, p.171)

'The fact is I have lived too much in the country to bear transplanting to town', he observed in a letter of December, 1881.<sup>428</sup>

As I have already suggested, there are parallels between the pattern of Hardy's own life, and a more general uneasiness with what was by then a largely urbanized existence. As city life came to dominate, contemporary concern manifested itself in a process of psychological retreat whose locus was an idealised vision of country life (indeed, the magazine *Country Life* was first published in 1897). Increasingly, the Victorian concept of 'Nature' came to be associated with the countryside, whilst the city came to symbolize the forces of modernity with which some, at least, felt ill at ease. Consequently, rural nostalgia sold well, and literary energy was focused on providing it. By comparison, city-life was relatively neglected by both poets and novelists or, in the case of Hardy himself, by both a poet and a novelist.<sup>429</sup> Bearing in mind that poetry was Hardy's chance to write as he would, and respond to those 'reviewers of his later books

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<sup>428</sup> Letter to Alexandra Sutherland Orr, dated 14 December 1881, in *SL*, p.28. Thirty years later, the boundaries were blurring fast: as Hardy remarked of Dorchester in 1910, 'we have become almost a London suburb owing to the quickened locomotion'; *LW*, p.380-381.

<sup>429</sup> This is discussed in Chapter 2.

who, if he only touched on London in his pages, promptly reminded him not to write of a place he was unacquainted with, but to get back to his sheepfolds', the collection betrays almost nothing whatsoever of his 'constant and varied experience' of London life (LW, p.64).

What Buell calls 'paradigmatic' first-wave eco-critics may have found nothing limiting in the imbalance suggested by this reluctance to look beyond the countryside; for these critics, he argues, "environment" effectively meant "natural environment".<sup>430</sup> But as Buell also remarks, environmental criticism has 'broadened in recent years from "natural" to include also the urban, the interweave of "built" and "natural" dimensions in every locale, and the interpenetration of the local by the global'.<sup>431</sup> From this perspective, Hardy's focus is therefore revealing; if in *Wessex Poems* he aimed to be radical, it was not by fashioning a new poetry of the urban milieu or by weaving together natural and built environments.

Yet *Wessex Poems* is nonetheless a strikingly original collection, particularly when we consider it in the context of a concept of 'Nature' still overshadowed by Romanticism. This much is apparent from 'In a Wood'. As we have seen, this is a poem constructed around the explicit contrast between views that might broadly if crudely be characterised as Wordsworthian and Darwinian. Seeking in the natural world a source of spiritual sustenance, the narrator instead finds in it a site of conflict: a vision of a hostile Darwinian world stripped of the divine, where God or gods are alike absent. This is a view entirely consistent with the sardonic commentary Hillis Miller detects in *Tess*:

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<sup>430</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.21.

<sup>431</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.12.

Some people would like to know whence the poet whose philosophy is in these days deemed as profound and trustworthy as his song is breezy and pure gets his authority for speaking of 'Nature's holy plan.'<sup>432</sup>

But 'In a Wood' is also noteworthy for Hardy's reluctance to offer a comforting alternative to that failed Wordsworthian vision. If the poem's vision is one that forces the narrator to abandon his illusions, it is also one to which the narrator cannot reconcile himself: his only response is retreat. 'In a Wood' does not, therefore, offer any resolution and, according to Hynes, this is the characteristic pattern of Hardy's poetry: it is built around a Hegelian dialectic, opposing thesis and antithesis, but without offering the resulting synthesis. 'The eternal conflict between irreconcilables', Hynes wrote, was 'for Hardy the first principle, and indeed the only principle, of universal order.'<sup>433</sup> Thus, the poetry dramatises what Ward called 'the impossibility of coherence in the modern world'.<sup>434</sup>

Hardy's own comments appear to provide a degree of support for this view. As he was later to remark, in March, 1917, his views were 'seemings, provisional impressions only, used for artistic purposes because they represent approximately the impressions of the age, and are plausible, till somebody produces better theories of the universe' (*LW*, p.406). He was only being truthful to the 'confused heap of impressions' that, time and time again, he presented as the sum of his poetic vision (*LW*, p.441).

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<sup>432</sup> Quoted in J. Hillis Miller, 'Nature and the Linguistic Moment', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfmacher and Tennyson, pp.440-451 (p.446); the source is *TD*, p.24.

<sup>433</sup> Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.vii.

<sup>434</sup> John Powell Ward, *Thomas Hardy's Poetry* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p.90.

For Davie, Hardy's apparent refusal to project a unifying vision onto his poetry is a measure of his failure. He is 'disabblingly modest in his aims'.<sup>435</sup> His expectations are meagre, his horizons limited, and he remains bound to a 'quotidian reality' that his verse nowhere transcends or supplants.<sup>436</sup>

And so his poems, instead of transforming and displacing quantifiable reality or the reality of common sense, are on the contrary just so many glosses on that reality, which is conceived of as unchallengeably 'given' and final. This is what makes it possible to say (once again) that he sold the vocation short, tacitly surrendering the proudest claims traditionally made for the act of the poetic imagination.<sup>437</sup>

If, however, Davie's difficulty is that Hardy only ever refers back to ('glosses') a reality he thought of as final, one can counter that Hardy was (given 'the state of the world in his time') radical precisely because he did not deviate from or displace that reality, but instead brought to bear the resources of verse in an effort both to describe it fully and forcefully and to reckon with its impact. (This in itself assumes that Davie is right to argue that reality was for Hardy 'unchallengeably "given" and final').<sup>438</sup> In context, Hardy chose the more difficult path, turning his back on the legacy of Romanticism, and, refusing to strain after the solace a re-imagined universe could no longer provide, staring it directly in the face.

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<sup>435</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.36.

<sup>436</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.61.

<sup>437</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.62.

<sup>438</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.62.



In other words, Hardy brought to bear his own sense of what might be meant by 'vision'. A poem like 'In a Wood' embodies its own terrifying and yet strangely thrilling perspective, a perspective derived from precisely the interaction discussed in Chapter 2, as new influences shaped and reshaped the Victorian concept of 'Nature'. More specifically, it registers the impact of a field of study that had only recently come to be called 'science', but which was already 'a major preoccupation' of the age'.<sup>439</sup>

### Hardy and Science

As the post-Darwinian world of 'In a Wood' suggests, the new 'science' had already helped to shape a compelling new vision of the universe; that this was just another version of the universe was not then apparent, at least to apostles like Huxley, who were convinced of its 'objective and eternal validity'.<sup>440</sup> Nor was it necessarily apparent to Hardy, who had grown to maturity at the same time as the new discipline. The term 'science' was first coined in the year of his birth, and Hardy was profoundly affected by its findings: *The Life* records that in 1882 Hardy attended Darwin's funeral, adding that 'as a young man he had been among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*'.<sup>441</sup> He later and pointedly remarked that 'my pages show harmony of view'

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<sup>439</sup> *TT*, p.xi.

<sup>440</sup> R. H. Super, 'Humanist at Bay', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.231-245 (p.240).

<sup>441</sup> J. A. V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.1; *LW*, p.158.

not only with Darwin but 'Huxley, Spencer, Hume, Mill, and others'.<sup>442</sup> Indeed Davie rightly (and repeatedly) describes Hardy as a 'scientific humanist'.<sup>443</sup>

The extent of that influence can and sometimes has been underestimated. As I have suggested in my discussion of Hardy's novels as pastoral, it is easy to consign Hardy to the role of patient, plodding elegist of a vanishing rural world (and as Leavis put it in 1948, 'a provincial manufacturer of gauche and heavy fictions'), and overlook the extent to which science shaped and informed his writing.<sup>444</sup> We are all familiar with the writer who patiently accounts for the continuing relevance and utility of the great barn in *Far From a Madding Crowd* (pp.142-144), a building on which the modern cannot improve; but we tend to forget that the same novel conveys a breathtaking impression of the earth's movement through the night sky:

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness; or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind; or by the solitude; but whatever be its origin the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding.<sup>445</sup>

Hardy's characteristically precise yet entrancing description is a reminder that evolutionary biology was only one of the disciplines that had so transformed the world-

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<sup>442</sup> Letter to Ernest Brennecke, 21 June 1924, *SL*, p.386.

<sup>443</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.62.

<sup>444</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto, 1948), p. 124.

<sup>445</sup> *FMC*, p.15.

view of the Victorians: astronomy and geology were equally important. In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Herschel (1738-1822) and Lyell (1795-1875) were as famous as Darwin was later to become. Hardy's writing reflects the influence of all three. The writer of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* is also the author of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), with its famous description of Stephen Knight clinging to a cliff-face, and there confronting his own imminent demise in the eyes of a long dead trilobite, 'standing forth in low relief from the rock' ('time closed up like fan before him').<sup>446</sup> And where geology opened out immensities of time, astronomy opened out immensities of space. *Two on a Tower* (1882) testifies to its impact. In the words of one editor, the novel represents 'the culmination' of Hardy's interest in astronomy; indeed, 'it would have been strange if Hardy had not written a novel in which astronomy was a strong element' (*TT*, p.xi).

Written in the same decade as 'In a Wood', *Two on a Tower* unashamedly embodies contemporary interest in and admiration for the modern scientist, and evokes exactly the kind of boundless optimism that led Galton to hope for 'the establishment of a sort of scientific priesthood'.<sup>447</sup> Its central character is an 'Adonis-astronomer' (p.53), whose observatory Hardy describes as 'the temple of that sublime mystery', a 'priest' (p.63) whose heaven 'was truly in the skies' (p.44). By way of contrast, the novel also points to the kind of paralysing fear that the immensity of time and space could also inspire. The astronomer stands humbled before the 'yawning spaces' of the universe

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<sup>446</sup> *PB*, p.200. In a piece entitled 'Science and Symbolism in the Language of Hardy's Novels', Ann Whitlock quotes a modern geologist who remarks that 'a modern reader of Hardy can be impressed with some of his geological observations', and whilst no trilobite has in fact ever been found in Beeny Cliff, 'at least he placed his trilobite where it could theoretically occur'; *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 16.1 (2000), 84-92 (p.89).

<sup>447</sup> Galton, p.260.

(p.33): these 'monsters of magnitude' (p.33) dwarf human concerns, 'reducing the importance of everything' (p.35). 'It makes me feel that it is not worth while to live', replies the astronomer's patron; 'it quite annihilates me' (p.33).

Hardy's poetry suggests that this was not his only imaginative response. On occasion, he found this enormously enlarged perspective liberating. It enabled him not only to look out at the stars but to imagine the view from them. In his mind's eye, Hardy was able to circle the globe:

In vision I roamed the flashing Firmament,  
So fierce in blaxon that the Night waxed wan,  
As though with an awed sense of such ostent;  
And as I thought my spirit ranged on and on

(ll.1-4)

This is the first stanza of another of the *Wessex Poems*, "In vision I roamed" (CP5). (The poem was, however, first drafted in 1866, suggesting that, not for the last time, one of Hardy's poetic utterances anticipated his prose.) Here, the narrator's 'footless traverse' (l.5) allows him to draw the contrary and comforting conclusion that, whilst these impersonal immensities do indeed underline his (and humankind's) inconsequentiality, they also signal the importance of what he does have, little as it may seem to be: thus, 'sick grief that you were far away' is turned to 'pleasant thankfulness that you were near' (l.9, l.10). In turn, the empty wastes of space also underline the preciousness of the planet: from the 'ghast heights', 'any spot on our own Earth seemed

Home' (I.5, I.8). That thought anticipates (even if it does not articulate) the epiphany experienced by a generation who, during the 1960s, witnessed the first ever pictures of the earth entire: as seen from space, the planet was unutterably beautiful, but also lonely and fragile. The image inspired a generation of activists and environmentalists. Space travel also prompted Boulding's celebrated paper on 'The economics of the coming Spaceship Earth' (1966), in which he argued that humankind was at last beginning to realise that the earth was and is all the home it had: a closed system whose resources are finite and whose life is limited. For 'there is, unfortunately, no escape from the grim Second Law of Thermodynamics'; and that law is exactly what Hardy has in mind when, in spirit ranging 'on and on' (I.4), he reaches 'the last chambers of the monstrous Dome':<sup>448</sup>

Where stars the brightest here to darkness die:

(II.6-7)

Or, as the central figure in *Two on a Tower* puts it, 'for all the wonder of these everlasting stars, they are not eternal; they burn out like candles' (p.34).

Whilst "'In vision I roamed'" is as much about 'astronomical discovery' as it is 'about any human relationship', however, Hardy does not develop the suggestive image of an isolated and lonely planet.<sup>449</sup> The poem returns us to a narrator who draws from this dazzling vision a very personal, a very prosaic kind of comfort. Nonetheless, "In

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<sup>448</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, 'The economics of the coming Spaceship Earth', in *Collected Papers* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1971), pp.383-394 (p.387), originally published 1966.

<sup>449</sup> *Poems*, ed. by Creighton, p.334.

vision I roamed” highlights the extent to which nineteenth-century science made it possible for the mind’s eye to visualise the world in a new way, in all its splendid but awful isolation. And in other poems, Hardy also returns to the view he had explored in *Two on a Tower*: that the larger view was thrilling, but also terrifying, and that the universe revealed by scientific discovery was uncaring and indifferent, ‘trackless, distant, drear’ (l.14), just as the natural world was in its myriad struggles shown to be wasteful and cruel. It is no surprise to find that the first-person narrative of another of the *Wessex Poems*, ‘A Sign Seeker’ (CP30), rues the achievements of this revolution in humankind’s understanding. Science has triumphed, making transparent what was once opaque:

I learn to prophesy the hid eclipse,  
The coming of eccentric orbs;  
To mete the dust the sky absorbs,  
To weigh the sun, and fix the hour each planet dips.

(ll.13-16)

Rather than glory in these gains, however, the poem voices the predicament (and pain) of those who seek through science an understanding – and a reassurance – that will ultimately elude them:

Such scope is granted not to lives like mine...

I have lain in dead men’s beds, have walked

The tombs of those with whom I had talked,  
Called many a gone and good one to shape a sign,

And panted for a response. But none replies;

No warnings loom, nor whisperings

To open out my limiting,

And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies.

(ll.41-48)

As I suggested in Chapter 2, a new scientific world-view had stripped the universe of what Hardy here describes as 'those sights of which old prophets tell' (l.22), and left in its place the 'huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine' of Carlyle's description.<sup>450</sup> This was Hardy's own view: 'the Cause of things' was not 'malignant' but 'indifferent and unconscious' (*LW*, p.441).

To some, amongst them George Meredith, this was a 'twilight view of life' (but then, too much of Hardy's company left Meredith feeling afflicted).<sup>451</sup> There is, as Ebbatson points out, a marked contrast between Hardy's 'In a Wood' and, for example, Meredith's 'The Woods of Westermain', which 'hymns a union of self with all created life'.<sup>452</sup>

Drink the sense the notes infuse,

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<sup>450</sup> Carlyle, p.150.

<sup>451</sup> Quoted in Roger Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition: A Theme in English Fiction, 1859-1914* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), p.98.

<sup>452</sup> Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*, p.100.

You a larger self will find:  
Sweetest fellowship ensues  
With the creatures of your kind.<sup>453</sup>

Nevertheless, we should not forget that 'In a Wood' is personative, and, like 'The Ivy-Wife' (CP33), parodic.<sup>454</sup> Both poems introduce a certain ironic distance from those who insist that, in Tennyson's famous phrase, 'Nature' is 'red in tooth and claw'.<sup>455</sup> As Hardy wrote, 'the world does not despise us; it only neglects us' (LW, p.50).

Equally, it is important not to underestimate what Hardy himself had lost: a living relationship with God, and a natural world that made manifest His existence. It was a loss Hardy regretted. To the end of his life, he remained 'churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but in so far as instincts and emotion ruled' (LW, p.407). As the narrator of 'The Impercipient' (CP44), a poem subtitled 'At a Cathedral Service', remarks, it is a 'drear destiny' (l.6) to be outcast from the 'bright believing band' (l.1). The significance of Hardy's remark is explored in the next section, which examines the way he used the poems in this first collection to explore and ultimately reject some of the metaphysical constructions around which the Victorian concept of 'Nature' had been built.

## Hardy's Godless Universe

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<sup>453</sup> George Meredith, 'The Woods of Westermain', III, in *Selected Poetical Works of George Meredith*, ed. by Trevelyan, p.46.

<sup>454</sup> Pinion, for example, suggests that the poem's dream of 'sylvan peace' (l.13) is in fact Fitzpiers's passing thought of a 'sylvan life' amidst the woodlanders (TW, p.137); see Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.22.

<sup>455</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. by Robert H. Ross (London: W. W. Norton, 1973), 56, l.15, p.36.



In 'Nature's Questioning' (CP43), one of the most famous of *Wessex Poems*, Hardy engages with what was, even late in the Victorian period, an unconventional (and to some, shocking) possibility: that traditional religious readings of the universe were entirely misguided. In the poem, Hardy explores the alternatives in a world from which God or gods are absent, and casts it in the form of a conversation between the narrator, and a scene composed of 'field, flock, and lonely tree' (l.2). The narrator, imagining them as 'chastened children sitting silent in a school' (l.4), hears them ask: why are we here?

"Has some Vast Imbecility,  
Mighty to build and blend,  
But impotent to tend,  
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?"

"Or come we of an Automaton  
Unconscious of our pains?...  
Or are we live remains  
Of Godhead dying downwards, brain and eye now gone?"

"Or is that some high Plan betides,  
As yet not understood,  
Of Evil stormed by Good,  
We the Forlorn Hope over which Achievement strides?"

(ll.13-24)

The questions are therefore asked, not of Nature, but by it. Where Wordsworth might, perhaps, have mused aloud amidst the solitary splendour of lake and mountain, and made its echoes into answers, 'Nature' here interrogates the poet. The universe, no longer a source of self-evident meaning, turns to the narrator (the story-teller) to create meaning for it: and yet the narrator can only reply 'No answerer I...' (l.25). It is the poet whose only answer is silence, not the landscape we know to be mute.

If that silence appears to be an acknowledgement that, *pace* Davie, Hardy turned his back on the poet's Romantic role as sage or seer, we should perhaps consider the illustration that accompanied 'Nature's Questioning.' This shows a broken key. Its symbolism is amplified by a detail whose meaning would have been more obvious than now: 'from its cruciform pattern and size', the key would seem to belong to 'a church door'.<sup>456</sup> The obvious conclusion is that this is not just a poem about a universe whose meaning cannot now be unlocked; it is about the Christian certainties – the Christian consolation – denied to Hardy by his loss of faith. As Creighton remarks, the poem's illustration is a 'precise metaphor' of Hardy's experience.<sup>457</sup> It articulates the anguished soul-searching of those who have lost faith, but not the need for it, and who still seek for meaning in a universe they cannot allow to be meaningless or accept as empty of meaning.

But there is another aspect to the illustration, another detail whose meaning we might now overlook, and it relates to a superstition described in *Far from the Madding*

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<sup>456</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.49.

<sup>457</sup> *Poems*, ed. by Creighton, p.342.

*Crowd*. As Maryann says, 'Breaking a key is a dreadful bodement' (*FMC*, p.215). Thus, the illustration denotes 'not only the insoluble question but also misfortune': the misfortune, perhaps, of a 'troubled generation' steeped in beliefs to which it could no longer subscribe.<sup>458</sup>

This was, as we have seen, the generation to which Hardy belonged. The young man who first drafted poems such as 'In Vision I Roamed', 'Hap' (CP4), and 'Neutral Tones' (CP9) had already been exposed to *The Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews*, and to a mood of scepticism that undermined both the comforting certainties of Christianity and the compensatory if less clearly defined alternatives offered by Romanticism. For those so exposed, the effect was the same whether one was a theist, deist, or pantheist: the universe could not now be searched for God or for evidence of Him. That may be the reason for the poem's refusal to reply. Hardy offers silence by way of answer not because he has shirked a sacred poetic responsibility to speak the truth, but because the truth is that there is nothing beyond silence; nothing beyond the 'withdrawing roar' of retreating beliefs.<sup>459</sup>

Meanwhile the winds, and rains,  
And Earth's old glooms and pains  
Are still the same, and gladdest Life Death neighbours nigh.

(ll.26-28)

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<sup>458</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.23; Roger Robinson, 'Hardy and Darwin', in *Thomas Hardy: the Writer and his Background*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Bell & Hyman, 1980), pp.128-149 (p.149).

<sup>459</sup> 'Dover Beach' (1867), l.25, Arnold, p.402.

The conflation of life and death in the last line – a line Hardy was later to rework so that it reads more conventionally – emphasises the poem's point: that, beyond this simple cycle, there is no great purpose to the workings of the natural world.<sup>460</sup> It is characterised only by what, in the poem that precedes 'Nature's Questioning', Hardy simply called Nature's 'mechanic artistry' ('To a Motherless Child', CP42, l.13).

This may also have a bearing on the rhyme scheme (ABBA) Hardy chose for 'Nature's Questioning', a rhyme scheme which Tennyson had rescued from obscurity and made famous in that defining statement of mid-Victorian doubt and belief, *In Memoriam*.<sup>461</sup> Given the care Hardy took over every aspect of his poetry, and given Tennyson's pre-eminence, his choice of rhyme scheme suggests that he intended us to draw a pointed comparison between Tennyson's anguished but ultimately successful attempt to find a larger meaning at work in the universe, and his own acknowledgement that there is no such thing.

A similar construction can be put upon 'The Sign-Seeker', which shares the same distinctive rhyme scheme. With its blunt acceptance (quoted above) that 'When a man falls he lies' (l.48), the poem is itself 'often read as a pessimistic reply to Tennyson's attempt to find meaning in the face of death'.<sup>462</sup> Compare Hardy's 'bleak negatives' with the final, reassuring lines of *In Memoriam*.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> In the *Collected Poems* of 1923 (the 2nd edition), for example, the last line is given as 'and Life and Death are neighbours nigh'. See *CPW1*, p.87.

<sup>461</sup> Before *In Memoriam* (1850), one would have to go back to the seventeenth century to find another use of it. Given Hardy's painstaking approach to the construction of his verse, and given *In Memoriam*'s success, it seems most unlikely that his appropriation of its stanza form was anything other than deliberate. See Richards, *English Poetry*, p.55.

<sup>462</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.60.

<sup>463</sup> Zietlow, p.16.

One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves.

(‘Epilogue’, ll.142-144)<sup>464</sup>

A turbulent half-century separates these two poems, yet both reflect the impact of new attitudes on and new approaches to existing structures of belief. But where Tennyson contrives to find consolation, Hardy determinedly and decidedly does not. Like ‘Nature’s Questioning’, ‘A Sign Seeker’ is just one of several *Wessex Poems* characterised by this refusal to take comfort; as in ‘Hap’, Hardy insists that the post-Darwinian universe demonstrates ‘a pattern but no meaning and teleology – except the one we choose to give it’.<sup>465</sup> As Hardy wrote of Hegel and others:

These venerable philosophers seem to start wrong; they cannot get away from a prepossession that the world must somehow have been made to be a comfortable place for man. (*LW*, p.185)

In fact, the universe is shaped only by ‘Crass Casualty’, a point that indicates the extent to which, in eschewing ‘the palliative “contortions” and compromises with conventional Victorian religion or conventional Victorian progressivism’, Hardy stood apart from his

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<sup>464</sup> Tennyson, p.90.

<sup>465</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993, repr. 1996), p.262.

age.<sup>466</sup> Hardy was, it seems, determined to look at the natural world unblinkingly: its 'defects must be looked in the face and transcribed', he wrote (*LW*, p.118). And some sense of that new (and neutral) vision is evoked by another of the illustrations in *Wessex Poems*, which shows a country scene of fields and rolling hills before which a pair of spectacles is held up: yet the spectacles neither magnify nor distort. The world as seen coincides exactly with the world as it is.

From an eco-critical point of view, therefore, one of the most remarkable aspects of *Wessex Poems* is Hardy's determination to free the natural world of the metaphysical baggage with which humankind had burdened it, and see beyond its Christian construction; it forms part of the transition from 'transcendental commentaries on nature' to 'an ecological outlook'.<sup>467</sup> It is also notable, of course, because of the link identified by Lynn White Jr – and discussed in Chapter 1 – between what he saw as the Christian biblical injunction to dominate nature, and 'the roots of our ecologic crisis'. It is, in effect, the same problem inadvertently disclosed in another of the *Wessex Poems*, 'To Outer Nature' (CP37). Here, the narrator regretfully looks back on a time when, 'all undoubting', he had believed that 'love alone had wrought thee' (ll.4-5).<sup>468</sup>

Wrought thee for my pleasure,

Planned thee as a measure

For expounding

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<sup>466</sup> 'Hap', l.11; Robinson, in *Thomas Hardy: the Writer and his Background*, ed. by Page, pp.128-149 (p.128).

<sup>467</sup> Robert P. McIntosh, *The Background of Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.291.

<sup>468</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.21.

And resounding

Glad things that men treasure.

(ll.6-10)

Notwithstanding the tender terms in which the narrator describes 'External Nature' (the name given it in the poem's original, holograph title), this stanza makes it quite clear that he values it not for itself, but because it is useful to him, and his sense of loss – his regret – derives from the fact that, in a universe stripped of the spiritual, he can no longer believe that the natural world was shaped for his and humankind's benefit.<sup>469</sup> And if (as Lynn White Jr. suggested) Christianity is indicted in the environment's exploitation, the natural world loses nothing by the narrator's loss of faith. It may even gain.

However, that in turn assumes that White's indictment is fair and balanced. Whilst Skolimowski is right to point out that his (in)famous paper has certainly made it more difficult to reconcile Christianity and environmentalism, Passmore, Attfield, and Haught have each suggested that the Christian tradition also contains within it the makings of a sympathetic environmental ethic.<sup>470</sup> Indeed, White himself made this suggestion in later articles.<sup>471</sup> As Passmore remarks, Western traditions 'are richer,

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<sup>469</sup> CPW1, p.80.

<sup>470</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *A Sacred Place to Dwell: Living with Reverence upon the Earth* (Dorset: Element, 1993); John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1980); and John F. Haught, 'Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology' in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. by Roger Gottlieb (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.270-85. Attfield has been cited.

<sup>471</sup> See Lynn White, Jr., 'Continuing the Conversation', in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, ed. by Ian G. Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp.55-65, and 'The future of compassion', *Ecumenical Review*, 30 (1978), 106-8.

more diversified, more flexible' than critics allow.<sup>472</sup> Equally, and as Garrard notes in his summary of various critical responses to White's argument, it may be that 'the Bible is neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric, but theocentric in a way and to a degree difficult for the modern reader to fully accept.'<sup>473</sup> In any case, it is difficult to accept any overly-simplistic link between Christianity and environmental exploitation when the greatest period of environmental destruction has, in advanced industrial countries, coincided with a decline in Christian belief. Indeed, it can be argued that, in stripping nature of its 'mysteries', scientists rather than churchmen have underwritten society's increasing indifference to the fate of the natural world: if they have freed the environment from its enslavement by one instrumentalist perspective, they have done so only to enslave it within their own.<sup>474</sup>

From this perspective, a poem like 'To Outer Nature' acquires a greater resonance. Like the speaker in 'A Sign Seeker', who would gladly trade knowledge for belief, its narrator rues the loss of:

Thy first sweetness,  
Radiance, meetness.

(ll.23-24)

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<sup>472</sup> Passmore, p.15.

<sup>473</sup> Garrard, p.109.

<sup>474</sup> See, for example, Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature* (Vermont: Park Street Press, 1991, repr. 1994), with its assertion that 'the scientific and technological conquest of nature expresses a mentality of domination that had been widespread in the ancient world but was vastly increased in power by technology and amplified by belief in unlimited progress' (p.60).



And, in the poem's final stanza, he wishes that time could only have stood still before it had a chance to take away his youthful illusions.<sup>475</sup>

Both 'To Outer Nature' and 'A Sign Seeker' give us a strong sense of what was lost to those like Hardy, and lost from their view of their world. A universe once full of purpose and promise appeared before them empty and indifferent. To some, that indifference must have felt more like outright rejection, and a profound feeling of alienation was a perhaps inevitable byproduct. This too finds its way into Hardy's verse. But we should be careful not to assume that Hardy was entirely convinced by the advance of 'scientific rationalism', as it may be called, and his own relationship to that spirit of skepticism is discussed in the next section.

### **The Limits of Reason in *Wessex Poems***

Hardy's ambivalent response to the best efforts of Victorian scientists and rationalists is summed up in the one of the more intriguing observations in *The Life*. 'Rationalists', he wrote, 'err as far in one direction as Revelationists or Mystics in the other; as far in the direction of logicity as their opponents away from it' (*LW*, p.358). The remark dates from 1907, but it finds a parallel in the poem 'Heiress and Architect' (CP49), first drafted in 1867, and one of five 'oddly assorted' pieces that conclude *Wessex Poems*.<sup>476</sup> In this remarkable but rarely reproduced poem, the hopes and aspirations of the eponymous Heiress are slowly and systematically picked apart by an 'arch-designer' (l.2). Pinion would have it that the architect represents fate, but the

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<sup>475</sup> See Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.20.

<sup>476</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.40.

poem also calls him 'the man of measuring eye' (l.56), a phrase that might also derive (Pinion notes) from Thomson's 'To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton'; and so the poem's meaning multiply, as his brutal and reductive reasoning collides with and crushes her hopes.<sup>477</sup>

'Shape me', she said, 'high halls with tracery  
And open ogive-work, that scent and hue  
Of buds, and travelling bees, may come in through,  
The note of birds, and singings of the sea,  
For these are much to me.'

'An idle whim!  
Broke forth from him  
Whom nought could warm to gallantries:  
'Cede all these buds and birds, the zephyr's call,  
And scents, and hues, and things that falter all,  
And choose as best the close and surly wall,  
For winters freeze.'

(ll.13-24)

What freezes is, of course, 'his cold clear voice, and cold clear view' (l.8). 'Women and nature have an age-old association', wrote Merchant in a pioneering work of eco-

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<sup>477</sup> See Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.26.

feminism, *The Death of Nature*, and because of it (she contended) both have been subjugated by patriarchal societies, never more effectively and efficiently than by the advanced industrialized countries shaped by scientific revolution.<sup>478</sup> With her willingness to transgress the boundaries that would separate the two, the heiress would seem to symbolize just this association of woman and nature. Conversely, the architect's relentless, insistent logic – a logic based on a 'law of stable things' (l.11) that nowhere exists in the natural world, and is very much a figment of the Enlightenment imagination – recalls what Ebbatson called 'the "universe of death" bequeathed by the mechanistic thinking of Locke's Newtonian psychology'.<sup>479</sup> He seems to stand for 'calculation, coldness, and death', and the 'banefulness of his last words, which end the poem, suggests a note of malicious triumph: "For you will die"'.<sup>480</sup> Zietlow describes the poem as impenetrable, its meaning 'ambivalent'; the eco-feminist would consider it a post-modern fable of startling and stark simplicity, for truly the Heiress is (as Zietlow also notes) 'the inheritor of the means of life'.<sup>481</sup>

Hardy's indictment of reason and rationality – his challenge to what Ehrenfeld memorably entitled *The Arrogance of Humanism* – has its echo in 'Nature's Questioning'.<sup>482</sup> For Creighton, the poem articulates Hardy's own predicament, Hardy's anguish. But it is not, after all, the narrator who asks for answers: it is the chastened

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<sup>478</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (Scranton, PA: HarperCollins, 1980), p.ixx. Merchant's aim was to 'reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women'; p.xxi.

<sup>479</sup> Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*, p.5.

<sup>480</sup> Zietlow, p.14.

<sup>481</sup> Zietlow, p.14, p.13. This is not to claim Hardy as a feminist, but to follow R. P. Draper, in whose essay on 'The Feminine Voice in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy' he argues that Hardy's 'temperament and experiences combined to enable him to transcend that often unconscious element of male arrogance'; *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 8.1 (1992), 71-83 (p.72).

<sup>482</sup> See David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

and constrained, the field and flock. Perhaps Hardy has in mind his shipwrecked fellow Victorians, clinging to worn-out creeds or clutching at new systems of belief, in which case the poem parodies their plaintive pleas for answers he knew the universe could no longer supply, a predicament to which he was himself now reluctantly reconciled. But there is another possibility: that, even at the poem's resolutely downbeat conclusion, Hardy's refusal to answer resonates with suggestive possibilities. As Ebbatson notes, 'Nature's Questioning' is in the last analysis about 'the *unknowability* of the universe' (my italics), not the certain knowledge that it has no wider meaning, no 'higher' purpose.<sup>483</sup> If so, 'Nature's Questioning' opposes the mechanical certainties of Victorian 'scientific naturalism', with its insistence on a closed and knowable universe. That may be because the poet who maintained that '*nothing* is as it appears' was equally skeptical about the scientist's confident claim to hold all the answers; 'Nature', Hardy remarked, 'is an arch-dissembler' (*LW*, p.182). As he later added (1915) 'I am utterly bewildered to understand how the doctrine that, beyond the knowable, there must always be an unknown, can be displaced' (*LW*, p.400). In Ebbatson's opinion, 'the unknowableness of the Universe must remain at the conclusion of any study of Hardy's ideas on Nature, founded as they are upon Spencer's First Cause.'<sup>484</sup> In Hardy's own words, 'I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty but not as Mystery' (*LW*, p.192).

We can get some sense of what Hardy meant by that 'Mystery' from the heightened interplay between narrator and landscape in 'A Meeting with Despair' (CP34), a poem that reminds us that it was a Victorian we have to thank for the phrase

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<sup>483</sup> Roger Ebbatson, *The Evolutionary Self: Hardy, Forster, Lawrence* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982) p.39. Hynes notes that 'The Impercipient' ('having no power to perceive') was initially entitled 'The Agnostic'; *CPW1*, p.87.

<sup>484</sup> Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*, p.99.

'pathetic fallacy'. In the 'black lean land' (l.3) of a moor, the narrator locates the 'many glooms' (l.6) of his own life, but of a sudden, 'ray-lit clouds' (l.11) transform his mood, and for a moment, he finds 'solace everywhere' (l.12). Then, against the horizon, a 'form rose, strange of mould' (l.18): the 'Despair' of the poem's title has made his entrance.

That he was hideous, hopeless, I could feel  
Rather than could behold.

"'Tis a dead spot, where even the light lies spent  
To darkness!' croaked the Thing.  
'Not if you look aloft!' said I, intent  
On my new reasoning.

'Yea – but await awhile!' he cried. 'Ho-ho! –  
Now look aloft and see!  
I looked. There, too, sat night: Heaven's radiant show  
Had gone that heartened me.

(ll.19-28)

With its depiction of a land 'lightless on every side' (l.8) and the croaking 'Thing' that gives it voice, the poem bears a passing resemblance to (and bears comparison with) Robert Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' (published in 1855),

another poem in which a darkened landscape – on this occasion, a marsh – looms large like a menacing presence.<sup>485</sup> Richards lists those who thought the poem ‘an oblique expression’ of Browning’s sub-conscious; Browning himself wrote that it ‘was only made out of my head’.<sup>486</sup> But neither Browning’s extended characterisation of this scene ‘of mute despair’ (l.118) – ‘such starved ignoble nature’ (l.55) – nor Hardy’s economical yet powerful evocation of a scene ‘where many glooms abide’ (.6) is entirely explicable.<sup>487</sup> If at first Hardy’s poem suggests how susceptible non-human nature (moor-land at dusk) is to these kinds of anthropomorphic projection, it also demonstrates how we in turn respond directly and immediately to the powerful sense stimuli of the natural world, as that same scene is transformed by a break in the clouds; but both interpretations are reasonable, rational, and the lingering impression left by this strange little poem is somehow impervious to and irreducible by anything as literal as reason. These landscapes gesture towards the dark disharmonies of Freud, and towards profoundly complex, highly symbolic, and emotionally charged interdependencies between human and non-human, animate and inanimate.

Once again, it is useful to invoke Davie, and a later essay on ‘The Industrial Landscape in English Literature’.<sup>488</sup> Here, Davie noted how both Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas, both of whom might be thought as nature writers *par excellence*, project on to the landscape their own psychological states: their loneliness is reflected in lonely places, and ‘the clue to this is that both Jefferies and Thomas see something

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<sup>485</sup> Turner also notes but does not develop his discussion of the similarity; see *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.165.

<sup>486</sup> *English Verse, 1830-90*, ed. by Bernard Richards (Harlow: Longman, 1980, repr. 1999), p.226.

<sup>487</sup> Robert Browning, ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’, in *English Verse*, ed. by Richards, p.228.

<sup>488</sup> In Donald Davie, *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp.242-250.

deadly in the non-human Nature that they celebrate'.<sup>489</sup> In 'A Meeting with Despair', so does Hardy's persona.

Readers of *Wessex Poems* would rightly counter that, in the context of the collection as a whole, 'A Meeting with Despair' is an unusual poem, and that it should be set against those pieces in which Hardy's landscape is rendered in terms so concrete that it resists this or indeed any kind of anthropomorphic or anthropocentric construction.<sup>490</sup> 'Neutral Tones' would seem to be a perfect example. One of Hardy's 'most often anthologised poems', 'Neutral Tones' takes its title from 'painter's jargon for a sketch in grey washes', and its chilly colourlessness suggests a poet 'trying to present a non-subjective impression'.<sup>491</sup> The poem's subject is love, or rather, the loss of it. Through embittered eyes, its narrator looks back on a meeting with a lover, reinterpreting it in the light of 'keen lessons that love deceives' (l.13).

Like the mood of the meeting itself, the narrator's bitterness contrasts sharply with the 'neutral tones' of the winter scene that, 'unresponsive but appropriate', forms the meeting's backdrop.<sup>492</sup> His present (and their past) anguish finds no correlative in a universe oblivious to human suffering. The poem's subtext is the way that the blank indifference – the horrifying neutrality – of the universe contrasts with, and even undercuts, human emotions. Independent and inviolable, the landscape is rendered in terms of such scrupulous realism that it resists any attempt to impose upon it surrogate 'feelings' or link to it some sub-conscious narrative or symbolic dimension. This

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<sup>489</sup> Davie, 'The Industrial Landscape in English Literature', in *With the Grain*, pp.242-250 (p.249).

<sup>490</sup> Indeed, Zietlow argues that this is precisely the meaning of 'A Meeting with Despair': 'to expect from indifferent nature support for one's moods and feelings is to invite despair'; p.12.

<sup>491</sup> *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Widdowson, p.291; Johnson, in *WP*, p.27, Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.7

<sup>492</sup> W. J. Keith, *The Poetry of Nature* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p.105.

landscape is simply inanimate; simply is; is neither unfeeling nor incapable of feeling, but simply, non-feeling. Arguing for 'the external existence of hard objects' in his chapter on the pathetic fallacy, Ruskin would no doubt have approved.<sup>493</sup>

If we look at 'Neutral Tones' more closely, however, the contrast between subject and object is not so clear-cut nor the poem's meaning so obvious. Its tones are *not* strictly neutral. Even amidst the simple, factual statements that make up the first stanza, two phrases – 'chidden of God' and 'starving sod' (l.3) – suggest that the narrator is not describing the setting dispassionately. As he looks back, the narrator's misery and contempt colours and contaminates the scene: love's lessons, the narrator remarks in the final stanza, 'have shaped to me':

Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,  
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

(ll.14-16)

And perhaps the narrator's retrospective is in turn overshadowed by that grimly symbolic landscape. Its wintry bleakness seems to fit, even to mould, the way he describes his lover, whose smile 'was the deadest thing':

Alive enough to have strength to die;

(ll.9-10)

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<sup>493</sup> Paulin, p.18.



Ironically, a poem which seems to contrast human anguish with the 'neutral tones' of the universe in fact points to the way that human emotion inevitably colours our perception of that universe, rendering any neutral, objective description impossible, and the way that, since the universe itself cannot be said to be separate from us, it too overshadows and affects our lives.

'Neutral Tones' therefore highlights an important aspect of the collection as a whole, and one which it has in common with the novels: Hardy's continuing insistence on interdependence, rather than independence.<sup>494</sup> This is the focus of the concluding section of the Chapter.

### **People and Place in *Wessex Poems***

Hardy's sense of the interrelationship between humankind and its environment is one of the continuing and most important aspects of his creative vision. In *Wessex Poems*, as elsewhere, Hardy opposes a tradition whose most recent manifestation we encountered in Buell's criticism of *Return of the Native* (it is 'about people in place, not about place itself').<sup>495</sup> In fact, there is nothing new about the distinction that this focus assumed. When in 1777 Robert Moore defined descriptive poetry, he meant 'what refers to external nature, and what has no direct connection either with human character, or any department of social life'.<sup>496</sup> Roughly a century later, in 1897, the Canadian poet, Charles D. Robert, again emphasised the distinction between nature

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<sup>494</sup> As McIntosh notes, 'all definitions of ecology agree that it has to do with the interrelationship of organisms and environment' (p.289).

<sup>495</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.255.

<sup>496</sup> Keith, *The Poetry of Nature*, p.6.

poetry that 'deals with pure description, and that which treats of nature in some one of its many relations with humanity'.<sup>497</sup> We have long lived with the assumption that (non-human) nature can be a subject in its own right; but perhaps it is only in recognising that we are never apart from nature that we can gather a true sense of its worth and a proper understanding of ourselves. Indeed, it is a moot point whether there can be such a thing as (say) purely descriptive nature poetry, when poetry announces itself so obviously as a frame through which the world may be seen. The apparent transparency of nature writing is itself illusory.

A poem like 'The Ivy Wife' dramatises the difficulty. Often seen as a companion piece to 'In a Wood', it parodies the struggle that Darwin tried to articulate and for which Spencer later and famously coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest'.

In new affection next I strove  
To coll an ash I saw,  
And in trust received my love;  
Till with my soft green claw  
I cramped and bound him as I wove...  
Such was my love: ha-ha!

(ll.13-18)

Whether or not the poem has any wider metaphorical significance – it has been suggested that Hardy meant it as a comment on the institution of marriage or even as a

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<sup>497</sup> Keith, *The Poetry of Nature*, p.4.

comment on the state of his own – ‘The Ivy Wife’ mocks any attempt at supposedly ‘pure’ nature description: it confesses, perhaps unwittingly, both our own verbal and linguistic inadequacy, and the psychological need to impose our own narratives on the environment. It also underlines the importance of Hillis Miller’s observation that, in Hardy’s novels and even in his poetry, ‘Nature is in itself seldom a source of value or meaning’.

Nature for Hardy has meaning and use only when it has been marked by man’s living in it and so has become a repository of signs preserving individual and collective history.<sup>498</sup>

The evidence, Hillis Miller notes, is in *The Life*, where Hardy remarks:

An object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature. Hence clouds, mists, and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand. (*LW*, p.120)

Indeed, British landscapes are also (and always) defined by this kind of interaction – by the print of a hand – even when this is sometimes overlooked. There are spaces which, even today, some may think of wildernesses; Dartmoor is perhaps an example. Yet

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<sup>498</sup> Hillis Miller, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfmacher and Tennyson, pp.440–451 (p.446, p.447).

places like Dartmoor did not pre-exist human activity; they were created by it.<sup>499</sup> Britain was once more or less entirely wooded, and in areas such as Dartmoor, it now appears possible that prehistoric peoples cleared the trees to till the soil, only for the rains to wash that now unstable soil away, leaving behind water-logged moors marked by wonderful views but very little bio-diversity.<sup>500</sup> It is, in other words, an early example of what today might be considered an environmental catastrophe unwittingly created by human interference.

Hardy himself was sometimes susceptible to the idea that there might be such a thing as 'wilderness'. On at least one occasion, it was how he described the area of heath he christened 'Egdon'. It was, wrote Hardy, 'a spot which, until now, has lain untouched since man appeared on the earth'.<sup>501</sup> But the constant presence of the human figure in his landscapes is, like his reluctance to write poems only about the non-human world, part of a general sense that there can be no clean separation of object and subject, narrator and narrated. What we think of as 'nature' is not independent of us, and neither are we independent of it. Interdependency is inescapable. The danger may therefore lie in the fact that, no matter how cleverly we construct and contest different versions of 'nature', it implies a degree of separation that in actuality does not and cannot exist. Howsoever we define it, 'nature' is only ever an approximate

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<sup>499</sup> For the topographical detail of Hardy's 'Egdon', see F. B. Pinion, *A Hardy Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p.312.

<sup>500</sup> Wildwood 'covered all the British Isles except for small areas of natural moorland and grassland on high mountains and in the far north', notes Rackham; 'such was the natural wildwood before the beginning of large-scale human activity'. Within about 2000 years of their arrival, Neolithic settlers 'had converted large tracts of country to farmland or heath'. This is the 'elm decline' to which Pennington refers in his *History of British Vegetation* (1969), adding that many of his contemporaries 'were reluctant to admit that the necessarily small numbers of prehistoric people could have such a profound effect'. See Rackham, p.68, p.72, and W. Pennington, quoted in Derek Wall, *Green History: A reader in environmental literature, philosophy and politics* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.26.

<sup>501</sup> Letter to Sir George Douglas, 20 November 1901, in *CL2*, p.303.

translation of the environment that surrounds us, a translation rendered less, not more reliable by our physical displacement from country to city, and by its impact on our ability to relate to and read the non-human, non-built world.<sup>502</sup> Davie quotes John Berger's telling remark that, in post-industrial societies, 'culture runs parallel to nature and is completely insulated from it':

Anything which enters that culture has to sever its connections with nature. Even natural sights (views) have been reduced in consumption to commodities.<sup>503</sup>

We have already seen one aspect of that consumption, in part fostered by Hardy himself: the rise of the guidebook as a kind of shorthand or substitute for the intimate association of people with place. But Hardy also rued the estrangement that urbanisation brought and the emergence of the word 'environment' perhaps implied. The breakdown of this connection between people and place – and by extension between culture and nature – is variously registered in Hardy's poetry. Intriguingly, it is also reflected in the style of that poetry, a style whose oddity the very first poem in the collection, 'The Temporary the All' (CP2), immediately announces. Its third stanza is representative:

'Thwart my wistful way did a damsel saunter,

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<sup>502</sup> Given the inevitable gulf between the environment and even our best efforts to describe, define, and understand it, not the least irony in humankind's current environmental predicament is the fact that many doubt the existence of anthropogenic climate change because occasional inaccuracies are discovered in the case for it or because predictions are necessarily cautious and hesitant: few scientists would ever admit to absolute certainty, yet it appears that many members of the public refuse to respond to anything less.

<sup>503</sup> Quoted by Davie, *With the Grain*, pp.242-250 (p.248).

Fair, albeit unformed to be all-eclipsing;  
'Maiden meet,' held I, 'till arise my forefelt  
Wonder of women.'

(ll.9-12)

Perhaps the *Saturday Review* had writing like this in mind when it described 'these many slovenly, slipshod, uncouth verses, stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived and worse wrought.'<sup>504</sup> As I suggested in my introductory discussion of *Wessex Poems*, Hardy's style defied the expectations of readers raised on Tennyson and still ill at ease with the poetry of elder statesmen like Browning and Meredith. But it is also possible that Hardy deliberately ruffled the smooth surface of conventional verse precisely to draw attention to the fact that the apparent transparency of nature writing – its seeming objectivity – really is illusory. As Hardy himself explained, he set out to carry into his verse 'the Gothic art-principle in which he had been trained – the principle of spontaneity' (*LW*, p.323). In poetry as in architecture, 'cunning irregularity is of enormous worth', and in consequence his verse was characterized by the 'unforeseen' character 'of his metres and stanzas – that of stress rather than syllable, poetic texture rather than poetic veneer' (*LW*, p.323). Indeed, *Wessex Poems* is an early and 'flamboyant' indication of Hardy's willingness to exploit and adapt all the resources of the poetic medium and of the English language itself.<sup>505</sup> In the opinion of one contemporary reviewer, Hardy seemed to see 'all the words of the dictionary on one place', regarding them 'all as equally available and appropriate for every literary

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<sup>504</sup> Unsigned review, dated 7 January 1899, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.319.

<sup>505</sup> Johnson, in *WP*, p.22.

purpose'.<sup>506</sup> But Hardy's style is more than a matter of vocabulary. As Millgate remarks, from the outset, Hardy confronted readers with 'challenges' that are now considered 'characteristically Hardyan', amongst them 'the dense stresses, the strict yet unfamiliar stanza form, the inverted syntax, the archaisms and odd coinages'.<sup>507</sup>

Perhaps unwittingly, Hardy's verse therefore challenges the dominance of what has been called 'scientific naturalism', on which I touched in Chapter 2. It was, Wilson notes, a world-view with its complement in a tradition of 'Victorian realism' that offered the illusion of objectivity and neutrality.<sup>508</sup> By contrast, the angularities of Hardy's writing style seem to be deliberately designed to highlight its intrinsic *unnaturalness*, and force the reader to reconsider just how 'transparent' a medium his verse was intended to be. From a more narrowly eco-critical perspective, his style draws immediate attention to the ways in which words shape, but may also limit our understanding of the environment. (This was, of course, a problem that Darwin encountered during the writing of *The Origin of Species*: as Beer remarks, it is extremely difficult to describe evolutionary theory without using a 'language of intention' that might imply teleology, and 'Darwin himself never entirely succeeded'.)<sup>509</sup>

Hardy's style is, therefore, an important aspect of the collection, and one to which I will return throughout the thesis, since it plays an important part in all of his verse and verse drama. In drawing this Chapter to a close, however, it is important to emphasise

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<sup>506</sup> W. M. Archer, *The Daily Chronicle*, quoted by Johnson, in *WP*, p.20-21.

<sup>507</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.362. As originally published, Millgate described these 'challenges' as 'problems' – an interesting shift in emphasis from the overtly critical to the less judgemental; see Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, repr. 1985), p.392.

<sup>508</sup> See Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.207).

<sup>509</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1983), p.24.

what may be the most eco-critically interesting aspect of *Wessex Poems*: Hardy's willingness to exploit but also to challenge a then dominant spirit of scientific enquiry whilst accepting (and even embracing) the contradictions that willingness created. The same writer who revelled in the dizzying vista opened up by scientific discovery ('In Vision I Roamed') also criticizes its crudely reductive basis ('Heiress and Architect') and rues what is lost by its gains ('The Sign-Seeker'). To return to an earlier point: Hardy more than once emphasized that 'you must not think me a hard-headed rationalist':

Half my time – particularly when writing verse – I “believe” (in the modern sense of the word) not only in the things Bergson believes in, but in spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places, etc, etc. But I do not believe in them in the old sense of the word any more for that. (*LW*, p.400)

'Particularly when writing verse': there are echoes here of Virginia Woolf's 'margin of the unexpressed', and of a surplus of meanings whose contradictions Hardy could not – or would not – resolve.<sup>510</sup> But then we should not look to Hardy for an argument overwhelming in its consistency: 'I hold that the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions', he once wrote (*LW*, p.408). If we take him at his word, we must accommodate his inconsistencies; they are their own form of challenge to 'hard-headed' rationalism.

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<sup>510</sup> Woolf's famous phrase originates in her essay on Hardy in *The Common Reader* (1932): 'it is as if Hardy himself were not quite aware of what he did, as if his consciousness held more than he could produce, and he left it for his readers to make out his full meaning and to supplement it from their own experience.' Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series* (London: Hogarth, 1965), p.248.



As *Wessex Poems* therefore suggests, poetry allowed Hardy a freedom he would not otherwise have allowed himself: to test the confident certainties of science, and its supposedly 'neutral' and 'objective' account of the environment, and to assert the possibility that beyond the known lay the unknown and unknowable. *Wessex Poems* is, however, a very short collection, containing just 51 poems. His next verse collection, *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901), was, by comparison, a much more substantial affair; and that is the subject of the next Chapter.

# Chapter 5

## *Poems of the Past and Present*

### Introduction

Chapter 5 focuses on *Poems of the Past and Present* (CP53-151). Published in November 1901, it contains nearly twice as many poems as Hardy's first collection. Eight had already been published in leading newspapers and periodicals: Hardy's stock as poet was rising, even if he was not inclined to admit it. 'Alas for that volume!' he exclaimed in a letter, as he anticipated the misconceptions of the critics; 'I feel gloomy in the extreme when I think of it'.<sup>511</sup>

In one respect, Hardy's pessimism was well-founded: he was 'never to earn from his poetry even a modest living'.<sup>512</sup> Yet reviews of *Poems of the Past and Present* were generally positive, and a second print run followed almost immediately. Here, after the idiosyncrasy and intensity of *Wessex Poems*, he relaxes into something approaching his mature style.

It remains, however, an oddly assorted collection. Divided by theme, the largest group of poems are those Hardy classed as 'Miscellaneous', and the preface underlines that apparent lack of cohesion:

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<sup>511</sup> Letter to Edmund Gosse, dated 17 September, 1901, in *CL2*, p.300.

<sup>512</sup> Gibson, p.141.

Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.<sup>513</sup>

Thus, the narrator who in one poem wonders what flowers might ponder, 'If all organic things/ Be sentient' ('To Flowers From Italy In Winter', CP92, ll.2-3), can in the next blithely announce that the 'iriséd embowment' (l.10) of a fine morning is simply:

Part of a benignant plan;

Proof that earth was made for man.

(*'On a Fine Morning'*, CP93, ll.12-14)

Yet the collection remains a genuinely fascinating one, and at its heart, a series of seven poems (CP113-119) stands out as an exceptional instance of an eco-poetic that vividly redefines how we look at and value the natural world: not as a superior species set apart from it, but as an integral part of it no more or less important than any other.

This series of seven is anticipated, however, by a number of other intriguing but rather more isolated poems from the groups Hardy entitled 'War Poems' and 'Poems of Pilgrimage', whilst several other important poems come to light in the next group, 'Miscellaneous Poems'. These are the poems with which the first three sections of the

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<sup>513</sup> 'Preface', in *CPW1*, p.113.

Chapter are concerned. The next four sections focus on the series of poems (CP113-119) discussed above; they highlight not only individual poems, but Hardy's striking use of language, and his depiction of animals. The penultimate section of the Chapter compares differing views of country life, whilst its final section summarises a remarkable, if highly varied collection.

### 'War Poems'

*Poems of the Past and Present* opens with twelve topical poems.<sup>514</sup> The first marks the recent death of Queen Victoria, and the remainder form a group of 'War Poems' prompted by the continuing conflict in South Africa. Amongst the most famous is a poem originally entitled 'The Dead Drummer', but today better known by the title 'Drummer Hodge' (CP60). It was first published in 1899 beneath the head-note 'one of the drummers killed was a native of a village near Casterbridge'.<sup>515</sup>

I  
They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest  
Uncoffined – just as found:  
His landmark is a kopje-crest  
That breaks the veldt around;  
And foreign constellations west  
Each night above his mound.

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<sup>514</sup> Purdy, p.118.

<sup>515</sup> Purdy, p.109.

II

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew –  
Fresh from his Wessex home –  
The meaning of the broad Karoo,  
The Bush, the dusty loam,  
And why uprose to nightly view  
Strange stars amid the gloam.

III

Yet portion of that unknown plain  
Will Hodge for ever be;  
His homely Northern breast and brain  
Grow to some Southern tree,  
And strange-eyed constellations reign  
His stars eternally.

Hardy was intrigued by war, but also appalled by it, as the muted, elegiac tone of 'Drummer Hodge' suggests. Rather surprisingly, Jon Silkin therefore includes it in his collection of *First World War* poetry, where it is compared to a poem the editor describes as 'candidly imperialist': Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' (1914).<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Jon Silkin, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1981, rev. 1996), p.79, p.30.

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,<sup>517</sup>

Whilst Brooke's poem draws the dead back into the bosom of an English motherland, fusing blood and soil in a piece of heroizing propaganda in which the words 'England' or 'English' feature half-a-dozen times, Hardy's poem looks outwards. 'Suffused with a cosmic compassion', it links a lost soul to the 'strange-eyed constellations' that claim sovereignty over him, and to fields that were foreign to young Hodge only in life; in death, he is a part of – and not apart from – them.<sup>518</sup>

This was, one should bear in mind, a poem written and published at the height of imperialist enthusiasm, and during a time of war. It is easy to overlook how radical Hardy's own position was, in part because he was all too ready to acknowledge his own excitement at war: 'when I feel that it must be, few people are more martial than I', he wrote.<sup>519</sup> But the 'War Poems' that open *Poems of the Past and Present* introduce a dissenting note that can hardly be overlooked:

When shall the saner softer polities  
Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land

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<sup>517</sup> *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, p.81.

<sup>518</sup> Gibson, p.145.

<sup>519</sup> Letter to Florence Henniker dated 11 October, 1899, in *CL2*, p.232.

And patriotism, grown Godlike, scorn to stand  
Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?

(‘Departure’, CP55, ll.11-14)

It is not therefore surprising that one newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle*, did object to Hardy’s commentary on the war, and, in particular, to another of the ‘War Poems’, ‘A Christmas Ghost-Story’ (CP59):

Mr. Thomas Hardy has pictured the soul of a dead soldier in Natal contemplating the battlefield, and wondering where is that peace on earth which is the Christian ideal of Christmastide. A fine conception, but we fear that soldier is Mr. Hardy’s soldier, and not one of the Dublin Fusiliers who cried amidst the storm of bullets at Tulega, ‘Let us make a name for ourselves!’<sup>520</sup>

Hardy defended his ghostly narrator in a letter dated the same day, 25 December 1899:

Having no physical frame to defend or sacrifice, how can he show either courage or fear? His views are no longer local; nations are all one to him; his country is not bounded by seas, but is co-extensive with the globe itself, and has put on, in part at any rate, the essence of the Universal.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> This was the newspaper’s Christmas Day leader; *CPW1*, p.368.

<sup>521</sup> Quoted in *CPW1*, p.369.

According to this conception of the poem, narrow, national boundaries dissolve before a persona that is coexistent with the world as a whole. It is a vision of humankind that sets aside individual ego and immerses itself in a broader, wider meaning. It is therefore ironic that Hardy was popular among soldiers 'as a reminder of the national character they were fighting to defend'.<sup>522</sup> That popularity is just another aspect of 'Hardy's reputation as the quintessential writer of an "Englishness" lost amidst the uncertainties of modern experience'.<sup>523</sup> But Hardy's verse resists easy assimilation by any kind of propagandist patriotism, just as his novels can seldom be forced to fit any limited definition of the pastoral. As in his Christmas ghost-story, Hardy's poetry breaks down the boundaries and barriers on which it depends. Hardy's emphasis on the land is not only (if ever) an exclusive interest in England. For Hardy, the land is not *England* alone, and this was a view he maintained in spite of a growing tendency for his countrymen to take the contrary view.

### **'Poems of Pilgrimage'**

It is not only in its ambivalent attitude towards war that Hardy's poetry sets itself apart from then conventional attitudes. The second section of the collection is given over to eleven 'Poems of Pilgrimage', yet they too cast a sideways glance at an age still splendidly self-confident and certain of the triumph of progress and of plenty. These poems do not pay conventional tribute to the sights and sounds of the Grand Tour.

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<sup>522</sup> *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. by Phillip Mallett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.9.

<sup>523</sup> Richard Nemesvari, 'Hardy and his readers', in *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. by Mallett, pp.38-74 (p.41).



Hardy visits 'Geneva the Proud', but finds her in a state of 'squalid undress' ('Genoa and the Mediterranean', CP65, I.4, I.16). He visits Rome, and marvels that, 'in the face of the "Vanitas vanitatum" reiterated by the ruins', 'singing workmen' should 'set and join'.<sup>524</sup>

Their frail new mansion's stuccoed cove and quoin  
With no apparent sense that years abrade,  
Though each rent wall their feeble works invade  
Once shamed all such in power of pier and groin.

(*'Rome – Building a New Street in the Ancient Quarter'*, CP69, II.10-14)

Everywhere, Hardy senses 'the power, the pride, the reach of perished Rome', as he describes it in 'In the Old Theatre, Fiesole' (CP67, I.14), and sees in it an object lesson for humankind:

'Dunces, Learn here to spell Humanity!'

(*'Rome – Building a New Street in the Ancient Quarter'*, I.8)

Looking back over the whole of human history – a history of calamity and collapse as well as great grandeur – Hardy sees through and beyond this momentary high-water mark of nineteenth-century civilisation. His point of view is, for example, dramatised in

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<sup>524</sup> Quoted in *CPW1*, p.371.

his account of a visit to Gibbon's garden in Lausanne, when the great man's shade asks:

'Still rule those minds on earth

At whom sage Milton's wormwood words were hurled:

"Truth like a bastard comes into the world

Never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth"?'

(*'Lausanne – In Gibbon's Old Garden: 11-12 p.m.'*, CP72, ll.13-16)

In fact, Hardy's contrariness conspires against even the most admiring of his poems, including 'Shelley's Skylark' (CP66). One of Hardy's most famous poems, it is his tribute to one of two 'matchless singers' (the other being Keats) whose graves he visited and later commemorated in 'Rome – At the Pyramid of Cestius near the Graves of Shelley and Keats' (CP71, l.20). Hardy thought Shelley 'our most marvellous lyricist', and the poem celebrates the poet's power to elevate and ennoble (*LW*, p.22). Yet the poem pulls in two directions: it borrows a heightened high-Romantic lyricism to celebrate the lark that Shelley heard and 'made immortal through times to be' (l.6), but its insistence on the 'meek life' (l.9) of this 'little ball of feather and bone' (l.10) undercuts the grand gesture. Whilst the poem may tell the 'faeries' to go find that 'tiny pinch of priceless dust' (ll.17-18), a pinch of dust it remains.

A similar tension can be detected in another of the 'Poems of Pilgrimage', 'Zermatt – To the Matterhorn' (CP73). It describes a triumphant moment in mountaineering history, when, in 1865, seven climbers made the first ascent of the

Matterhorn, only for four to perish on the descent. Hardy later met one of the survivors, Edward Whymper, whose own, highly popular account of the fateful day is an account of a mountain 'conquered' and possessed ('the Matterhorn was ours!').<sup>525</sup>

First drafted some thirty-two years later, Hardy's poem celebrates the achievement in terms of which Whymper would have approved. It is a supreme moment in human history, a 'tragic feat of manly might' (l.7), and it alone rescues the Matterhorn from obscurity: it is as though, until that moment, the mountain's existence was of no consequence ('of history thou hadst none', l.8).

But it is not for nothing that the poem takes as its title the mountain's name, not those of its supposed conquerors, and there is good reason why Hardy choose for the poem's form the Petrarchan or classical sonnet, where an octave, divided into two quatrains each rhymed ABBA, is followed by and contrasts with a sestet, rhymed CDCDCD. In Hardy's poem, the sestet shifts the focus away from this one brief moment in the mountain's long life.

Yet ages ere men topped thee, late and soon  
Thou didst behold the planets lift and lower;  
Saw'st, maybe, Joshua's pausing sun and moon,  
And the betokening sky when Caesar's power  
Approached its bloody end: yea, even that Noon  
When darkness filled the earth till the ninth hour.

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<sup>525</sup> Edward Whymper, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, 5th edn (London: Thomas Nelson, n.s.), p.382. As Schama notes, 'the more impossible the peak appeared, the more important it was to master it (to use one of Whymper's favourite verbs)'; Schama, p.504.

(ll.9-14)

Hardy's message may be simply, if inelegantly summarised: by the standards of our own short lives, at least, the mountain endures; we do not.

### **'Miscellaneous Poems'**

The collection's next grouping is entitled 'Miscellaneous Poems', but it contains a sequence of philosophical pieces with its own collective coherence. Here, we find a poet still negotiating the complex inheritance of nineteenth-century attitudes towards 'Nature', which Hardy often personifies as 'the Mother' ('The Mother Mourns', CP76, 'The Lacking Sense', CP80, 'Doom and She', CP82, 'The Sleep-Worker', CP85, 'The Bullfinches', CP86, 'God-Forgotten', CP87).

Mother of all things made,  
Matchless in artistry,  
Unlit with sight is she.

(*'Doom and She'*, CP82, ll.6-8)

Hardy's complaint, if complaint it be, is summed up in this stanza: that 'the Mother' weaves unwittingly. In doing so, she admits 'distress into delights' ('The Lacking Sense', l.15):

Fair growths, foul cankers, right enmeshed with wrong,  
Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song,

(‘The Sleep-Worker’, ll.6-7)

In this near-continuous sequence of poems (CP76, CP80, CP82, CP85, CP86, CP87), the tone is set by the first, ‘The Mother Mourns’ (CP76). Nature is overheard plaintively complaining that the brightest of her creations has learnt to find fault with her, that humankind:

‘No more sees my sun as a Sanct-shape,  
My moon as the Night-queen,  
My stars as august and sublime ones  
That influences rain:

‘Reckons gross and ignoble my teaching,  
Immoral my story,  
My love-lights a lure, that my species  
May gather and gain.

(ll.45-52)

These things (and more) humankind now holds ‘in doubt and disdain’ (l.20). But there is a twist, and a terrible one.

...My species are dwindling,  
My forests grow barren,  
My popinjays fail from their tappings,  
My larks from their strain.

'My leopardine beauties are rarer,  
My tusky ones vanish,  
My children have aped mine own slaughters  
To quicken my wane.

(ll.73-80)

'My children have aped my own slaughters': now that the natural world is no longer seen as sacred or special, humankind has no reason to exercise restraint, for the mother has taught it none; and so 'my tusky one vanish'.<sup>526</sup>

This is an aspect of the poem that earlier critics (amongst them Marsden, Bailey, and Pinion) overlook. They note that Hardy refers to the evolutionary struggle between species; Pinion adds that it is 'aggravated by the slaughter for which man is responsible'; but largely, the commentaries dwell on the idea that humankind has outgrown its creator.<sup>527</sup> As Hardy remarked in 1883, we have 'reached a degree of intelligence which Nature never contemplated when framing her laws, and for which she consequently has provided no adequate satisfactions' (*LW*, p.169). This thought 'was clearly the germ of the poem', *The Life* adds (*LW*, p.169). Other entries (such as 9 May,

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<sup>526</sup> See Sheldrake, pp.9-34.

<sup>527</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.39.

1881, and 7 April, 1889), along with a line in *Jude*, attest to the significance of this idea.<sup>528</sup>

But it is also quite clear that, even as the poems indict Nature for her disregard, Hardy does not quite let go of the idea that humankind bears a share of the responsibility for the 'red ravage' whereat 'all creation groans': as he adds in 'The Lacking Sense', 'thou art of her clay' (l.19, l.20, l.30). In 'At a Lunar Eclipse' (CP79), a poem embedded in this same sequence, the Earth casts a shadow of 'imperturbable serenity' (l.4) on the Moon, but that placid profile acts only as a 'stellar gauge of earthly show' (l.12): of 'moil and misery' (l.8), and of 'nation at war with nation' (l.13). When in 'I Said to Love' (CP77), Hardy's narrator is threatened with an end to humankind ('man's race shall perish', l.23), his reply is 'so let it be' (l.29).

As lines such as these so clearly suggest, Hardy is clear sighted about humankind's limitations. He is not the less a humanist for the fact that his humanism whilst hopeful is often hard-hitting and sometimes nihilistic. The result is an intriguing refusal to accept any unquestioning faith in humankind's self-evident virtue, even as Hardy hopes that what he calls 'lovingkindness' – an evolving altruism – might yet make for 'Joy seldom yet attained by humankind!' ('To An Unborn Pauper Child', CP91, l.36).<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> 'The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it' (*LW*, p.153). 'It may be questioned if Nature, or what we call Nature, so far back as when she crossed the line from invertebrates to vertebrates, did not exceed her mission. This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences' (*LW*, p.227). At the 'framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity.' *JO*, p.331.

<sup>529</sup> The phrase 'lovingkindness' appears in two poems in this collection, 'A Broken Appointment' (CP99), l.6, and 'How Great My Grief' (CP101), l.6.

This sequence of philosophical pieces gives way to the set of seven poems to which I have already referred, poems in which the focus swings sharply from the human to the non-human. They are 'An August Midnight' (CP113), 'The Caged Thrush Freed and Home Again' (CP114), 'Birds at Winter Nightfall' (CP115), 'The Puzzled Game-Birds' (CP116), 'Winter in Durnover Field' (CP117), 'The Last Chrysanthemum' (CP118), and 'The Darkling Thrush' (CP119). The first and last of these poems are discussed separately, but the poems they frame are, for two reasons, important in themselves. Firstly, they provide an excellent example of the distinctive way in which Hardy exploited an idiosyncratic style to underline and amplify the meaning of his poems. Secondly, they provide an important insight into Hardy's view of the natural world and, in particular, his view of animals.

### **Idiosyncrasies of Style in *Poems of the Past and Present***

Even today, readers may find Hardy's style unusual. At the time, it was a clear challenge to a poetry-reading public whose taste was still shaped by a lyricism that took as its cue (and perhaps took to excess) the heightened language of Romanticism. Hardy's use of odd and unusual forms would seem to underline the point: three of these poems (amongst them 'Winter in Durnover Field'), take the form of a triolet. Since the triolet is a French fixed verse-form dating from the thirteenth century, its appearance at the turn of the twentieth century might well seem odd.<sup>530</sup> In fact, the triolet was one of several French verse forms (such as the rondeau and villanelle) revived by the

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<sup>530</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.157.





With lines split and shared between speakers – unlikely comrades united in adversity – the poem's artificiality of form does not consciously register; its spoken simplicity does. Terse and unsentimental, it dignifies and deepens a moment whose prosaic ordinariness would otherwise merit no mention at all.

At the same time, it feels faintly absurd to argue that form follows function. Gleeson White talked of the 'ease' and 'charm of a good triolet', whilst Bailey thought the form 'graceful, amusing'; yet there is nothing charming about the scene depicted in 'Winter in Durnover Field'.<sup>533</sup> Bailey is right to suggest that Hardy felt it 'as a tragedy'.<sup>534</sup> Indeed, the preceding poems, 'Birds at Winter Nightfall' and 'The Puzzled Game-Birds', whilst also cast in the same form, are scarcely more light-hearted and if anything equally bleak; by which token the subject matter of 'The Caged Thrush' is hardly more suited to *its* form, the villanelle, a 'round song that originated in the rustic dances of medieval France'.<sup>535</sup> This is, perhaps, what early critics meant when they described the way in which the form and function of Hardy's verse are all at odds: Southworth for one thought that Hardy's 'frequent attempts at enclosing the thought in a predetermined pattern, ill-fitted for the purpose,' were the 'greatest single obstacle' to successful communication.<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Hardy's Metres*, p.247; Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.157.

<sup>534</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.165.

<sup>535</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.153.

<sup>536</sup> James Granville Southworth, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p.166.

In fact, Hardy's 'restless eclecticism' was not limited to prosody or syntax; it extended to his diction.<sup>537</sup> As F.R. Leavis disapprovingly remarked, Hardy threw together any and every kind of word: 'the romantic-poetical, the prosaic banal, the stilted literary, the colloquial, the archaistic, the erudite, the technical, the dialect, the brand-new Hardy coinage'.<sup>538</sup> These seven short poems offer several examples of Hardy's fondness for unusual words, including his own unique creations or compounds, such as 'retrocede', 'witlessness' ('The Last Chrysanthemum') or 'outleant' ('The Darkling Thrush'). There are also examples of his fondness for obsolete or obscure terms, such as the archaic plural of 'treen' for trees in 'The Caged Thrush', or the word 'dumbledore' in 'An August Midnight'.<sup>539</sup>

It is possible to draw from these examples an obvious and predictable conclusion: that the 'gauche' and 'naïf aplomb' revealed by Hardy's choice of language variously reflects his lowly social origins, his lack of education, and perhaps and above all his rural roots.<sup>540</sup> Marsden falls into this trap when he remarks that critics who object to apparently obsolete words such as 'treen' ought to consider 'how far they were obsolete to Hardy'.<sup>541</sup> This is Hardy as rural naïf, inadvertently reverting to dialect words such as 'wonneing', as he does in 'On an Invitation to the United States' (CP75, I.9). In fact, Hardy's attitude towards and use of dialect demonstrates exactly how complex but also how carefully considered his approach to language.

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<sup>537</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.32.

<sup>538</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Hardy the Poet', in *The Southern Review* (1940), 87-98 (p.88).

<sup>539</sup> Pinion takes 'dumbledore' to mean a bumble-bee; it is in fact a dung beetle (*A Commentary*, p.51). The distinction is important, since this creature thrives on the dung generated by farm animals, in the same way that the raven depends on the open ground created by human cultivation, whether to seek there for insects and worms, or to take advantage of an occasional bounty of seed.

<sup>540</sup> Leavis, 'Hardy the Poet', 87-98 (p.88).

<sup>541</sup> Marsden, p.140.

The novels provide an obvious clue. In one notable passage in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for instance, Henchard reprimands Elizabeth-Jane for using dialect words, 'those terrible marks of the beast to the truly genteel'.<sup>542</sup> Hardy's account of Henchard's response implies an amused and ironising distance. Yet Henchard's is the response of those who, anxious to establish their gentility, insisted on distancing themselves from a form of language that was considered a deviation from the standard. To some extent Hardy himself did so, insisting that dialect was 'not spoken in his mother's house', when both his parents 'had grown up as dialect speakers and largely remained so'.<sup>543</sup> In actual fact, and as William Barnes (1801-1886) set out to demonstrate, the Dorset dialect contained a number of quite distinct words and phrases.<sup>544</sup> Indeed, Barnes famously argued that so-called 'standard' English was impure because contaminated by foreign influences, whilst dialect represented a 'purer, and in some cases richer' form of the language.<sup>545</sup> Thus, the language of the labouring classes was immeasurably better than that of their social superiors, and an entirely fit vehicle for the expression of rustic thought and feeling.

That, perhaps, is the point at which the views of Hardy and Barnes diverge. In Hardy's poetry, dialect appears infrequently; Marsden counts 85 instances in over 900 poems.<sup>546</sup> Unlike Barnes, it is not rustic thoughts and feelings that he is determined to

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<sup>542</sup> *MC*, p.121.

<sup>543</sup> Quoted in Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.30; p.30-31.

<sup>544</sup> In a lecture on "'Those Terrible Marks of the Beast": Barnes, Hardy, and the Dorset Dialect', delivered at the 18th International Thomas Hardy Conference on 1 August, 2008, Dr. Alan Chedzoy noted that Barnes had identified 1,478 such words. The discussion in this paragraph draws on this lecture.

<sup>545</sup> Quoted in David Trotter, *The English Novel in History, 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993, repr. 2002), p.158.

<sup>546</sup> Marsden, p.140.

articulate, or a rural audience with which he wants to connect. As Hardy noted in a review (1879) of Barnes' *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*:

Unfortunately, as must always be the case with descriptive poetry which embodies local speech, tone, and personal detail to such an extent as is done in these pages, much is lost to the outside reader, who only looks into them to revive his general recollections of country life.<sup>547</sup>

Elsewhere, Hardy talked of the 'veil of dialect', 'disconcerting to many, and to some distasteful'.<sup>548</sup> For Hardy the issue was simply that, 'though a regular growth and not a provincial corruption', dialect was 'indubitably fast perishing'.<sup>549</sup>

Equally, Hardy was not anxious to imitate leading poets like Tennyson, Swinburne, and Meredith; as Morrell remarks, 'this is not to deny that Hardy learnt from them; but what he learnt was how to dissociate himself'.<sup>550</sup> Throughout his career as a poet, Hardy signalled his disengagement from the 'surface beauty' of 'late nineteenth century verse', seeking to reunite form and function or, to paraphrase Morrell, medium and message: 'any check, snag, stumble, hesitation is an essential element, part of the poem itself'.<sup>551</sup>

I have made this point before, in the context of *Wessex Poems*. Here, I simply wish to emphasise that Hardy's poetry was a departure from 'the main tradition of late

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<sup>547</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p.27.

<sup>548</sup> Hardy's remarks appear as an introduction to a selection of Barnes' verse in Ward's *The English Poets* in 1918; see *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.389.

<sup>549</sup> Hardy, in *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.389.

<sup>550</sup> Roy Morrell, 'Thomas Hardy's Poetry Today', in *The Bulletin of the Thomas Hardy Society of Japan*, 13 (1984), 1-24 (p.18).

<sup>551</sup> Morrell, 1-24 (p.21, p.17).

nineteenth century verse', and by virtue of that fact, it had an impact on his reading public that cannot now be recovered.<sup>552</sup> As Morrell points out, 'today most readers will have few preconceptions; many will be even disposed in favour of the unusual and unconventional.'<sup>553</sup>

To many of his contemporaries, however, Hardy's choice of language was striking, even dramatic, and always part of the poem's point. As the *Saturday Review* remarked in its unsigned review of the collection (11 January, 1902), Hardy 'has intensely interesting things to say, and he can say them in an intensely personal way'.<sup>554</sup> His verse 'often halts, or dances in hobnails', but 'he can always force words to say exactly what he wants them to say'.<sup>555</sup> And whilst Leavis later (and typically) assumed that Hardy's diction was the unwitting product of a poet 'with no sensitiveness for words', he too agreed that it was 'extremely personal', 'positively, even aggressively, so'.<sup>556</sup>

'For his purpose of making us wonder at the usual', notes Grundy, 'Hardy's harshness of style is invaluable'.<sup>557</sup> In Hardy's own words, 'my art is to intensify the expression of things, so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible' (*LW*, p.183). But that process of intensification also forces the reader to recognise that what is being presented is not an unmediated reality, but a constructed one, seen through the poet's eyes. This is realism, but of a heightened and highly self-aware variety. In Hardy's own words:

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<sup>552</sup> Morrell, 1-24 (p.20-1).

<sup>553</sup> Morrell, 1-24 (p.21).

<sup>554</sup> Review in *Saturday Review*, 11 January, 1902, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.331.

<sup>555</sup> Review in *Saturday Review*, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.331.

<sup>556</sup> Leavis, 'Hardy the Poet', 87-98 (p.88).

<sup>557</sup> Isobel Grundy, 'Hardy's Harshness', in *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Patricia Clements and Juliet Grindle (London: Vision Press, 1980), pp.1-17 (p.15).

As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind. (LW, p.158)

In other words, we see the thing in itself even as we see how and in what way it has been framed, an effect most obviously reflected in Hardy's striking choice of verse forms. This is, in effect, the linguistic equivalent of Hardy's extraordinary ability to combine viewpoints, seeming to see the humblest and the grandest of subjects simultaneously. It also suggests a way of escaping – or perhaps side-stepping – what eco-critics call the 'crisis of representation': the post-modern sense that language can only ever refer to itself, and that, trapped inside this cage of words, we cannot connect with the natural world; that, to quote Bate, we can no longer overlook the fact that 'nature is a word, not a thing'.<sup>558</sup> This theoretically challenging theme will be developed in Chapter 6, which deals with *The Dynasts*, perhaps the most extraordinary product of Hardy's idiosyncratic way of seeing.

### Hardy's Depiction of Animals

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<sup>558</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.247, p.248.

Setting aside 'An August Midnight' and 'The Darkling Thrush', four of the five remaining poems in this sequence of seven are bird poems. They are not descriptive, as John Clare's were, but dramatic. In all four, birds speak their own stories. In the first, 'The Caged Thrush Freed and Home Again', a bird compares its own ignorance to humankind's, declaring that humans know 'but little more than we!' (ll.12):

'They cannot change the Frost's decree,

They cannot keep the skies serene;

(ll.13-14)

In the next, 'Birds at Winter Nightfall', the birds lament the fast flying snow-flakes that keep indoors 'that crumb-outcaster' (l.5) when 'all the berries now are gone!' (l.8; the place is given as Max Gate), a reminder, as Bailey suggests, of the hard times that may fall on birds.<sup>559</sup> With its depiction of birds scratching hopelessly for grain in a field 'frozen to iron hardness', 'Winter in Durnover Field' shares the same theme. And in 'The Puzzled Game-Birds', Hardy's meaning could hardly be plainer: reared only to be shot, game-birds are overheard wondering how it is possible that those who first reared now 'bereave and bleed us' (l.3).

Yet even this little poem is unusual. Game-birds do not normally feature in bird poetry.<sup>560</sup> As the stuff of sport, perhaps this is hardly surprising. Shooting game-birds had become something of a Victorian obsession, and many thousands of gamekeepers

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<sup>559</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.163.

<sup>560</sup> See *The Penguin Book of Bird Poetry*, ed. by Peggy Munsterberg (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.80.



were dedicated to their upkeep and speedy dispatch. In 1882, Hardy recorded a conversation with one of those gamekeepers, who explained how on a single day seven hundred pheasants were 'shot wholesale'.<sup>561</sup> Hardy's revulsion surfaces in *Tess*, and the scene where, on her way to Flintcomb-Ash, she encounters the aftermath of a shoot: injured pheasants 'writhing in agony' (*TD*, p.278). At about the same time the poem was published, an acquaintance recalled how Hardy 'spoke of the wickedness of shooting game-birds', whilst a letter to Florence Henniker on 11 October, 1900, makes it clear that he thought it a 'slaughter'.<sup>562</sup>

In short, he was forthright in condemning blood sports. In a 'Swiftian' letter of 2 March, 1904, he wrote:

I can only say generally that the prevalence of those sports that consist in the pleasure of watching a fellow-creature, weaker and less favoured than ourselves, in its struggles to escape the death-agony we mean to inflict by a treacherous contrivance, seems to me one of the many convincing proofs that we have not yet emerged from barbarism.

'In the present state of affairs', Hardy continued, 'there would appear to be no reason why the children, say, of overcrowded families should not be used for sporting purposes.' As he concluded, 'there would be no difference in principle: moreover these

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<sup>561</sup> Quoted in Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.165.

<sup>562</sup> W. L. Phelps, quoted in Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.165; *CL2*, p.232.

children would often escape lives intrinsically less happy than those of wild birds and animals.<sup>563</sup>

Hardy's views on the treatment of animals are pronounced and unusual, and to some readers they no doubt seemed odd. They nonetheless bear direct comparison with the views of Henry Salt, whose work on *Animals' Rights: Connected in Relation to Social Progress* was published in 1892:

All that has been said of hunting and coursing is applicable also – in a less degree, perhaps, but on exactly the same principle – to the sports of shooting and fishing. It does not matter, so far as the question of animal's rights is concerned, whether you run your victims to death with a pack of yelping hounds, or shoot him with a gun, or drag him from his native waters by a hook; the point at issue is simply whether man is justified in inflicting any form of death or suffering on the lower orders for his mere amusement and caprice. There can be little doubt what answer must be given to this question.<sup>564</sup>

Nevertheless, Hardy's views on the treatment of animals are more central to his verse than many critics have suggested. Indeed, there is reason to believe that he saw all of his creative output in terms shaped in part by his sympathy for and empathy with the disadvantaged, in which he included (to use the language of the day) 'the lower orders' of animal. As he remarked to William Archer in February, 1901, 'what are my books but

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<sup>563</sup> CL3, p.110.

<sup>564</sup> Quoted in Wall, p.73.

one long plea against “man’s inhumanity to man” – woman – and to the lower animals?’<sup>565</sup>

From an eco-critical perspective, this aspect of Hardy’s thinking – and its relationship to his oeuvre – is therefore particularly important. Assessing its importance is, however, complicated by our own uncertainty about how and in what way to value non-human life. As a starting point, it may therefore be useful to explain the views of two leading modern exponents of animal rights, Peter Singer and Tom Regan.

According to Singer, animals have moral standing because they too can suffer; and the ‘capacity for suffering’ is ‘not only necessary, but also sufficient for us to say that a being has interests’.<sup>566</sup> Singer’s shorthand for this capacity is sentience.

Singer’s emphasis on limiting suffering makes it clear that his approach is utilitarian; in effect, he borrows from Bentham. By contrast, Regan’s approach is rights-based. Maltreating animals is wrong on principle, because it denies ‘their intrinsic ethical value’.<sup>567</sup> The fault lies with a system ‘that allows us to view animals as resources, here for us, to be eaten, or surgically manipulated, or put in our cross hairs for sport or money’.<sup>568</sup> According to Regan, an animal has intrinsic (or ‘inherent’) value because it is ‘the subject-of-a-life’, with its own interests and welfare, quite independent of its ‘utility for others’.<sup>569</sup> An animal is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.

Both arguments present the environmentalist with difficulties. The most important of these may be that they are individualistic arguments, concerned with single

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<sup>565</sup> Quoted in Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.379.

<sup>566</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd edn (New York: New York Review of Books Press, 1990), p.8.

<sup>567</sup> Des Jardins, p.116.

<sup>568</sup> Tom Regan, ‘The Case for Animal Rights’, in *In Defence of Animals*, ed. by Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p.13, quoted in Des Jardins, p.116.

<sup>569</sup> Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p.243.

animals rather than species. The sole surviving members of an endangered species are no more important than the many that predeceased them. Thus, Regan and Singer are at odds with any form of environmentalism that refers outwards to (eco-)systems and (biotic) communities; indeed, Regan calls this kind of view 'environmental fascism'.<sup>570</sup> Furthermore, both Regan and Singer award moral standing only to those creatures that most closely resemble human beings. Consequently, as Des Jardins points out, invertebrates do not count, yet it is on these tiny creatures that eco-systems depend.<sup>571</sup>

We have already, in Descartes' philosophical dualism, encountered one reason for insisting on a divide between human and animal kingdoms, and Hardy alludes to it in a letter of 1909:<sup>572</sup>

The discovery of the laws of evolution, which revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively. Therefore the practice of vivisection, which might have been defended while the belief ruled that men and animals are essentially different, has been left by that discovery without any logical argument in its favour. And if the practice, to the extent merely of inflicting slight discomfort now and then, be defended (as I sometimes hold it may) on grounds of it being good

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<sup>570</sup> Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, p.361-2.

<sup>571</sup> Des Jardins, p.122.

<sup>572</sup> See Chapter 1. The Deep Ecologist sees the 'rise of the anthropocentric modern world' in the unholy alliance of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism (such as 'Descartes's famous "mind-body" dualism') with an anthropocentric and arrogant Christianity that together exalted the view 'that humans had unlimited powers, potential, and freedom'; see George Sessions, 'Ecocentrism and the Anthropocentric Detour', in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions, pp.156-183 (p.160, p.161).

policy for animals as well as men, it is nevertheless in strictness a wrong, and stands precisely in the same category as would stand its practice on men themselves. (LW, p.373-4)

There are other reasons to find this letter particularly fascinating. Hardy's reference to the 'conscious world' is comparable with Singer's concept of sentience, but his position also anticipates Regan's ('it is nevertheless in strictness a wrong'), whilst at the same time challenging the utilitarian, who 'makes no *in principle* case against causing animals to suffer'.<sup>573</sup>

Hardy restates his ideas in a letter, dated 10 April, 1910, to the Secretary of the Humanitarian League, the body founded by Henry Salt in 1891:

Few people seem to perceive fully as yet that the most far-reaching consequence of the establishment of the common origin of all species is ethical; that it logically involved a re-adjustment of altruistic morals by enlarging as a *necessity of rightness* the application of what has been called "The Golden Rule" beyond the area of mere mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom. Possibly Darwin himself did not wholly perceive it, though he alluded to it. While man was deemed to be a creation apart from all other creations, a secondary or tertiary morality was considered good enough towards the "inferior" races; but no person who reasons nowadays can escape the trying conclusion that this is not maintainable. And though I myself do not at present see how the principle of

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<sup>573</sup> Des Jardins, p.119.

equal justice all round is to be carried out in its entirety, I recognize that the League is grappling with the question. (LW, p.376-7)

In fact, this second letter suggests that Hardy's views extend far beyond any narrowly bounded discussion of 'animals rights'. Here, he seems to suggest that 'The Golden Rule' (a fundamental ethic of reciprocity, common to many religious systems, and encapsulated in the phrase 'do unto others as they would do unto you') should be extended to 'the whole animal kingdom'. By comparison, Singer's concept of 'sentience' and Regan's individualistic 'subject-of-a-life' criterion are limited in a way that Hardy's argument is not; and the poetry simply amplifies this sense of Hardy's openness and inclusivity. As Bill Morgan, a leading Hardy scholar (and noted poet) remarked, Hardy is able to find poetry in the 'least prepossessing of things': 'imported flowers in winter; the felling of a tree'; and 'perhaps most wondrously', the insects that collect around a lamp late one summer's evening, a scene described by Hardy in the poem 'An August Midnight'.<sup>574</sup>

### **Beyond Animal Rights: 'An August Midnight'**

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A shaded lamp and a waving blind,\*

And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:

On this scene enter – winged, horned, and spined –

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<sup>574</sup> Bill Morgan, 'Contemporary Poets on Hardy', in *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 1 (1998), 45-48 (p.45).

A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;  
While 'mid my page there idly stands  
A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands...

II

Thus meet we five, in this still place,  
At this point of time, at this point in space.  
– My guests besmear my new-penned line,  
Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.  
'God's humblest, they!' I muse. Yet why?  
They know Earth-Secrets that know not I.

Max Gate, 1899

'An August Midnight' is the first of the seven poems to which I have been referring, and it provides another opportunity to explore Hardy's view of the natural world, and the background to it. It is also an obvious favourite amongst those who admire Hardy's verse; it formed the starting point of a 2008 lecture by Phillip Mallett, during which he compared it with Ted Hughes' 'The Thought-Fox', from Hughes' first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957).<sup>575</sup>

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:

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<sup>575</sup> Phillip Mallett's lecture on 'The Years Abrade: Inscription and Effacement in Hardy's Poetry', was delivered at the 18th International Thomas Hardy Conference on 31 July, 2008. The discussion that follows draws on the ideas set out in that lecture.

Something else is alive  
Besides the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Hughes' thought-fox is, of course, as much metaphorical device as literal presence. It enacts a moment of poetic inspiration, as, with 'a sudden sharp hot stink of fox':

It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The winter is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.<sup>576</sup>

But where Hughes imposes himself on the natural world, Mallet notes, Hardy resigns himself to it, and in doing so, the insects become his equals, his clumsy collaborators.<sup>577</sup> His world is concrete and real; as the words 'Max Gate, 1899' signal, and in that world, invertebrates matter: bugs, like birds, are for Hardy equally important subjects.

Characteristically, 'An August Midnight' ends with a question, an admission that Hardy cannot claim to know or know better than these tiny creatures, and may even know less than they do. If anything, therefore, it seems to align Hardy with the biocentric outlook of another significant modern thinker, Paul Taylor. Taylor argues that we should respect nonhuman life not only because it too has its aims, its ends, its own teleology, but because humans are a part of the same eco-system, and are equally

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<sup>576</sup> Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.21.

<sup>577</sup> As Neill remarks, it is 'somehow characteristic of Hardy to be humbled by the humblest'; Edward Neill, *The Secret Life of Thomas Hardy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.140.



dependent on it; and because equally dependent – because interdependent – humans have no superiority over other living things.<sup>578</sup> As Awano notes, Hardy has a clear sense of humankind as a species 'connected intimately and equally' with all living things.<sup>579</sup> 'Thus meet we five' (l.7), as he declares in the poem, quite without any sense of his own superiority.

Taylor would call this 'species impartiality', but it is important to emphasise the degree to which Hardy's own views were informed by contemporary thinking, and, in particular, by the work of Auguste Comte.<sup>580</sup> Hardy was clearly influenced by Comte's concept of 'altruism' (from the French 'autrui', meaning 'other people'), a phrase the French philosopher coined to describe what he considered to be a moral obligation to help others. The phrase appears in both the letters quoted above, and Hardy's tentative faith in the growth of what he called 'loving-kindness' echoes Comte's own belief in the spread of altruism throughout society.<sup>581</sup> But Hardy's views differ from Comte's in at least one respect. Unlike Comte, Hardy believed in the rights of the individual.

Comte's anti-individualism is not at first obvious, but he was quite clear that individual self-interest might have to be sacrificed in order to help others. Furthermore, he explicitly rejected the idea of individual rights. As he remarked in the *Catechisme Positiviste* (first published in 1852), the 'social point of view':

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<sup>578</sup> See Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, repr. 1989), pp.44-45.

<sup>579</sup> Shuji Awano, 'Hardy's "Readjusted" Darwinism', in *The Bulletin of the Thomas Hardy Society of Japan*, 13 (1984), 48-60 (p.51).

<sup>580</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 45.

<sup>581</sup> 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922), in *CP*, p.558.

...cannot tolerate the notion of *rights*, for such notion rests on individualism. We are born under a load of obligations of every kind, obligations to our predecessors, to our successors, to our contemporaries.<sup>582</sup>

'*To live for others*', Comte believed, was 'the definitive formula of human morality'.<sup>583</sup>

And on occasion, Hardy himself seems ready to accept that the individual is subject to the collective. 'Man is entirely subordinate to the world', copied Hardy, 'each living being to its own environment'.<sup>584</sup> 'The very ground-thought of Science', he also noted, 'is to treat man as part of the natural order.'<sup>585</sup> This idea is central to Hardy's way of thinking, and readily apparent in, say, novels like *The Return of the Native*, with its depiction of the relationship between Clym and Egdon Heath:

If anyone knew the heath well it was Clym. He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance, with its odours. He might be said to be its product. His eyes had first opened thereon: with its appearance all the first images of his memory were mingled: his estimate of life had been coloured by it. (*RN*, p.175)

Furthermore, later works (such as *The Dynasts*) emphasise the extent to which Hardy was influenced by the idea that human behaviour is pre-determined. Nonetheless, he clung to the idea that a 'modicum of free will' was possible, perhaps because, whilst

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<sup>582</sup> Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. by Richard Congreve (London: John Chapman, 1858), p.332.

<sup>583</sup> Comte, p.313.

<sup>584</sup> Entry 730, *LN1*, p.74.

<sup>585</sup> Entry 633, *LN1*, p.65.

Comte remained a profound influence on his way of thinking, he was also deeply affected by the work (and individualism) of both J. S. Mill and Charles Fourier.<sup>586</sup> The relevance is, of course, that this would seem to align Hardy with a shallow rather than a deep environmentalism, and the kind of 'ethical extensionism' we have discussed in connection with Singer and Regan, whose views are firmly individualistic and hierarchical: man remains the measure of all things. But (and this would seem counterintuitive) there *is* a parallel between Hardy's views and the ideas that lie behind one of the more radical of modern environmentalist platforms, Deep Ecology.

That parallel relates, perhaps inevitably, to the views of its leading advocate, Arne Naess. He maintains that, through a process of self-actualisation or 'self-realisation', it is possible to move and mature from ego-self to 'ecological self', or from a 'narrow egoistic self' to 'a large comprehensive Self' through which 'we cannot help but "identify" our self with all living beings': 'the ecological self of a person is that with which the person identifies.'<sup>587</sup>

In other words, the process of identification is key, since it is through that process that 'the self is widened and deepened', enabling us to 'see ourselves in others':

Thus, everything that can be achieved by altruism – the *dutiful, moral* consideration for others – can be achieved, and much more, by the process of

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<sup>586</sup> 'Apology', in *CP*, p.558.

<sup>587</sup> See Naess, 'Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World', pp.225-239 (p.226); Naess, 'The Deep Ecology Movement', pp.64-84 (p.80); and Naess, 'Self-realization', pp.225-239 (p.225 and p.227); all in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions.

widening and deepening ourselves. Following Kant, we then act *beautifully*, but neither morally nor immorally.<sup>588</sup>

Perhaps paradoxically, environmentally responsible behaviour then becomes a form of enlightened self-interest, a concept that returns us to the ethic of reciprocity, and the Golden Rule to which Hardy refers in his letter of 1910.

However, Hardy's 'strange compassion' is as much emotional in origin as intellectual.<sup>589</sup> 'Feeling', he wrote, quoting Comte, is 'the great motor force of human life'.<sup>590</sup> This too connects Hardy with the Deep Ecology platform. Just as Warwick Fox explains Deep Ecology in terms of 'an identification of self with all that is', so Naess argues that self-realisation is experienced 'when we identify with the universe', noting that many experience that identification 'when they see animals suffering'.<sup>591</sup> *The Life* is full of such references. One of the earliest recalls Hardy's first visit to London, aged eight or nine, when amidst 'the pandemonium of Smithfield', he heard the 'cries of ill-treated animals'.<sup>592</sup> In another, *The Life* records how, when Hardy was still only a child, his father idly threw a stone at a 'half-frozen' fieldfare:

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<sup>588</sup> Naess, 'Self-realization', in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions, pp.225-239 (p.226). Maturity in humans 'can be measured along a scale from selfishness to an increased realisation of Self, that is, by broadening and deepening the self, rather than being measured by degrees of dutiful altruism'. Naess, 'The Deep Ecology Movement', in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions, pp.64-84 (p.82).

<sup>589</sup> Evelyn Hardy, *The Countryman's Ear and other Essays on Thomas Hardy* (Padstow: Tabb House, 1982), p.2.

<sup>590</sup> Entry 666, *LN1*, p.68.

<sup>591</sup> Andrew McLaughlin, 'The Heart of Deep Ecology', pp.85-94 (p.91), and Stephan Bodian, 'Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: An Interview with Arne Naess', pp.26-36 (p.30), both in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Sessions.

<sup>592</sup> *LW*, p.22. This concern stayed with Hardy throughout his life. In a later entry, dating from 1926, *The Life* notes that 'the sight of animals being taken to market or driven to slaughter always aroused in Hardy feelings of intense pity, as he well knew, as must anyone living in or near a market-town, how much needless suffering is inflicted'; at his death, Hardy left money to two societies in the hope they might find

The fieldfare fell dead, and the child Thomas picked it up and it was as light as a feather, all skin and bone, practically starved. He said he had never forgotten how the body of the fieldfare felt in his hand: the memory had always haunted him. (*LW*, p.479)

The novels develop that response. 'With the impulse of a soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself' (*TD*, p.279), Tess breaks the necks of the game-birds shot and left to die; Awano notes that as she does so, she slips back into dialect, a language that reconnects her to an identity more attuned to the natural world.<sup>593</sup> Similarly, Jude cannot bear to scare off the rooks: 'a magic thread of fellow-feeling united his own life with theirs' (*JO*, p.9). And whilst Hardy can without any distinction run together 'altruism, or The Golden Rule, or whatever "Love your Neighbour as Yourself" may be called', he nonetheless believes that these things will be brought about 'by the pain we see in others reacting on ourselves, as if we and they were part of one body': 'mankind, in fact, may be, and possibly will be, viewed as members of one corporeal frame' (*LW*, p.235).

It is also clear that Hardy was led to identify with the natural or non-human world not only through compassion, but empathy: 'I sit under a tree, and feel alone: I think of certain insects around me as magnified by the microscope', *The Life* recalls in an entry from 28 November, 1875, 'and I feel I am by no means alone' (*LW*, p.110). As he was

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a way of conveying animals to slaughter 'with a view to the lessening of their sufferings in such transit'. *LW*, p.468.

<sup>593</sup> Awano, 'Hardy's "Readjusted" Darwinism', 48-60 (p.53).

later to remark (1905), 'I sometimes look upon all things in inanimate Nature as pensive mutes' (*LW*, p.117).

That remarkable idea is echoed in the penultimate of this set of seven poems, 'The Last Chrysanthemum' (CP118):

Too late its beauty, lonely thing,  
The season's shine is spent,  
Nothing remains for it but shivering  
In tempests turbulent.

(ll.13-16)

In the poem's last stanza, however, the narrator interrupts his own train of thought.

- I talk as if the thing were born  
With sense to work its mind;  
Yet it is but one mask of many worn  
By the Great Face behind.

(ll.21-24)

As a symbol of ecological interconnectedness, this is an image as potent as it is unscientific. It also narrowly avoids that 'illegitimate emotional projection' Ruskin

entitled 'the pathetic fallacy'.<sup>594</sup> As Davis notes, this tendency to ascribe human emotions to non-human objects reflects 'the need of a disinherited generation to find, all too literally, a *place* for human emotion in the universe.'<sup>595</sup> For Hardy, it remains 'a cruel injustice' that he cannot; yet he too keeps on 'seeking and making meanings'.<sup>596</sup>

That idea is reflected in the Chapter's next section, which focuses on the last of this series of poems, 'The Darkling Thrush'.

### 'The Darkling Thrush'

Like five of the poems that precede it, 'The Darkling Thrush' describes a wintry, a 'spectre-gray' (l.2) world (as Beach remarks of Hardy's verse, 'the gentle, the sublime, the luxuriant, the cheerful aspects of nature have largely given place to the severe, the sombre, the meagre').<sup>597</sup> Yet into this bleak scene breaks the sound of a thrush, his 'full-hearted evensong' (l.19) confronting and comforting the poem's lonely narrator with its 'joy illimited' (l.20):

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,

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<sup>594</sup> Philip Davis, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 8: The Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.80.

<sup>595</sup> Davis, p.540.

<sup>596</sup> LW, p.153. Davis, p.541.

<sup>597</sup> Beach, p.505.

That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

(ll.25-32)

As Millgate remarks, the poem 'eloquently testifies to the role of emotion in all of Hardy's thought'.<sup>598</sup> And if Hardy was here allowing his feelings to overcome the evidence of his experience, and perhaps also the strong and even overriding sense of the natural world as a site of strife, we might also bear in mind that the Darwinian vision of competition within species was soon to be countered by Peter Kropotkin's case for mutual aid and mutual support, written whilst in exile in England.

Kropotkin's essays (1890-96) were first published in the monthly periodical *Nineteenth Century*, and then collected as *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, and published in London in 1902. Kropotkin argued that 'the war of each against all is not *the law of nature*', and that 'mutual aid is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle'.<sup>599</sup>

The animal species, in which individual struggle has been reduced to its narrowest limits, and the practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development, are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous, and the most open to further progress. The mutual protection which is obtained in this case, the possibility of attaining old age and of accumulating experience, the

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<sup>598</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.376.

<sup>599</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (New York: Dover, 2006), p.25.



higher intellectual development, and the further growth of sociable habits, secure the maintenance of the species, its extension, and its further progressive evolution. The unsociable species, on the contrary, are doomed to decay.<sup>600</sup>

Kropotkin is not mentioned in primary reference material such as Hardy's *Literary Notebooks* or *The Life*, so we must assume that Hardy was not familiar with the ideas of the so-called 'Anarchist Prince'. However, Hardy may have come to a similar conclusion quite independently.<sup>601</sup> The *Life* quotes the following conversation (1893):

The doctrines of Darwin require readjusting largely; for instance, the survival of the fittest in the struggle for life. There is an altruism and coalescence between cells as well as an antagonism. Certain cells destroy certain cells; but others assist and combine.

'Well, I can't say', adds Hardy (*LW*, p.275). Yet his notebooks elsewhere copy this piece from the *Examiner*, dated 6 May 1876:

Science tells us that, in the struggle for life, the surviving organism is not necessarily that which is absolutely the best in an ideal sense, though it must be that which is most in harmony with surrounding conditions.<sup>602</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> Kropotkin, p.242.

<sup>601</sup> Awano, 'Hardy's "Readjusted" Darwinism', 48-60 (p.49).

<sup>602</sup> Entry 392, Björk, ed., *LN1*, p.40.

We return to 'The Darkling Thrush', with its description of a single figure venturing forth amidst 'Winter's dregs' (l.3) to make contact with the natural world, even as the rest of nearby humankind seeks out 'their household fires' (l.8). It is conventional to read the poem as a reflection on the 'dying century' during which spiritual certainties had been undermined by science and rationalism.<sup>603</sup> But given the unusual nature of Hardy's views, it is also possible to read into Hardy's poem the hope – however faint – that the sympathy and understanding which brings the poem's narrator into brief alliance with an aged, frail, and 'blast-beruffled' (l.22) bird might find its larger echo in the resumption of a meaningful relationship between humankind and its environment.

It is only now, perhaps, that we can see what is at stake in that relationship, and see what has come of the loss of it. Seven of the *Poems of the Past and Present* take birds as a subject, and in four, the birds in question are bullfinches, thrushes, and the skylark (CP86, CP114 and CP119, and CP66). Yet, looking back over a quarter century, Harvey notes the decline of farmland birds of just the kind that Hardy describes: bullfinch (down 76%); song thrush (73%); skylark (58%).<sup>604</sup> Overall, breeding farmland bird numbers are 52% lower than in 1966. And whilst there was a brief halt (1999-2004) in the long-term decline, more recent (2007) statistics from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs indicate that numbers have now fallen to the lowest recorded level.<sup>605</sup> Yet these are the birds that biodiversity experts

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<sup>603</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.167. Susan Swier provides a useful brief summary of these and other interpretations in an article entitled "Some Blessed Hope": Hardy's Darkling Thrush', but she too emphasises the spiritual and specifically Christian connotations of the poem; *The Hardy Society Journal*, 6.1 (2010), 75-81.

<sup>604</sup> Graham Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.24. First published 1997.

<sup>605</sup> 'Renewed action on farmland birds needed', 31 October 2008, *DEFRA News Release* <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2008/081031c.htm>> [accessed 11 November 2008].

consider 'a key indicator of the health of the countryside'.<sup>606</sup> The Mother's species are indeed dwindling (see 'The Mother Mourns', 1.73). As Julian Huxley remarked in the 'Preface' to the British edition of *Silent Spring*, paraphrasing his brother Aldous, 'we are losing half the subject matter of English poetry.'<sup>607</sup>

Ironically, we nonetheless continue to idealise the countryside, largely ignorant of the changes that have been made to it over the last half-century. As I explain in the next section, those changes have been both dramatic and damaging.

### **The Idealisation and Actuality of Country Life**

As I noted in Chapter 3, Hardy lived through a process of enormous change in the nation's relationship to the land, as a combination of rural depopulation and population growth shifted its centre of gravity from countryside to city. But change otherwise came only slowly to the countryside, despite the tendency to think of this world as one swiftly overtaken by it. For the land itself, the era of real change, sudden and catastrophic, came later. It began during the Second World War, when over 6 million acres of land was brought under cultivation.<sup>608</sup> In the words of *The Official Story of British Farming* (1945), the 'bad lands of Britain' – 'unwanted wastes of bog, fen and moorland' – were made good.<sup>609</sup> Gas, gun, and fire made possible a systematic and 'terrific' slaughter of pests: wood-pigeons, house-sparrows, rats, squirrels, and rabbits,

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<sup>606</sup> Juliette Jowit, 'Farmland fears for turtle doves and partridges', *The Guardian*, 1 November 2008, p.23.

<sup>607</sup> Carson, p.xxii.

<sup>608</sup> *Land at War: The Official Story of British Farming, 1939-1944* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1945), p.95.

<sup>609</sup> *Land at War*, p.38.

and incidentally, badgers and foxes.<sup>610</sup> The result, *The Official Story* declared without any trace of irony, was 'new life on the land'.<sup>611</sup>

National survival is one thing; (agri)business another. After the war, the utilitarian exploitation of the land was allowed to continue, and even promoted. In the drive for greater efficiency and higher outputs, small farms and small fields gave way to large. Encouraged by state subsidies, mixed farming gave way to specialisation. Biological gave way to agrochemical farming, as weedkillers and insecticides came into widespread use. Monocultural deserts resulted. In technical terms, the UK's arable areas were made and remain 'very species-poor'.<sup>612</sup>

There are several reasons for this loss of biodiversity. One is a loss of habitat, such as hedgerows. This is not the result of urban encroachment. According to the Countryside Survey of 2000, a total of 13.5% of England and Wales is 'developed land', but only 2.8% is 'urban core' containing a clear majority (75%) of urban cover, whilst 7.9% consists of built-up and garden areas in the countryside, and the remaining 2.7% comprises transport features in rural areas.<sup>613</sup> By any definition, 86.5% of England and Wales still consists of green fields. It may come as something of a surprise to discover that, after landfill, it is in fact agriculture that constitutes 'the single greatest cause of habitat loss'.<sup>614</sup>

As Harvey explains, another explanation for loss of biodiversity lies with the widespread use of agrochemicals. Species-rich grassland, with its myriad meadow

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<sup>610</sup> *Land at War*, p.49.

<sup>611</sup> *Land at War*, p.85.

<sup>612</sup> See the Executive Summary of R. H. Haines-Young, *et al*, *Accounting for Nature: Assessing Habitats in the UK Countryside* (London: Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2000), at <<http://www.cs2000.org.uk/report.htm>> [accessed 7 August 2007].

<sup>613</sup> See Haines-Young, *et al* (Chapter 8).

<sup>614</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.34.

flowers, plant species, and populations of beetle and butterfly, has given way to fields that, whilst still green, contain nothing but ryegrass.<sup>615</sup> Insecticides have had their own impact. Carson' *Silent Spring* famously explained why American songbirds were falling silent: 'they should not be called "insecticides"', she wrote, 'but "biocides".'<sup>616</sup> Although Carson published her book in 1962, it was not until 1969 that, in this country at least, DDT was finally phased out.<sup>617</sup>

As Harvey points out, however, the impact of agrochemicals can also be indirect even though equally catastrophic. For example, agrochemicals destroy the weeds on which invertebrates like beetles depend. Since they in turn feed both insect-eaters (such as fieldfare and skylark) and the small mammals (like mice and shrews) on which larger hunters like owl and kestrel depend, the decline in these species is, whilst not immediate, also entirely predictable.<sup>618</sup> One of the most detailed studies of this process was carried out by the Game Conservancy Trust, a charity largely financed by those anxious to keep alive enough game to shoot.<sup>619</sup> Careful study of a declining partridge population demonstrated the link to pesticides, whose use destroyed the insects (like rove beetles) on which partridges fed.<sup>620</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that 'the countryside records human default as well as design, and much of it has a life of its own independent of human activity.'<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>615</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.33.

<sup>616</sup> 'These sprays, dusts, and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests, and homes – non-selective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the "good" and the "bad", to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in the soil – all this though the target may be only a few weeds or insects.' Carson, p.7.

<sup>617</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.24.

<sup>618</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.29.

<sup>619</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.26.

<sup>620</sup> Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, p.26-28.

<sup>621</sup> Rackham, p.xiii.

Nonetheless, the rate and scale of change has since 1940 been unprecedented. As Rackham remarks, the period 1870 – 1940 was less destructive 'than any five years since'.<sup>622</sup> And what is lost, notes Rackham, is 'a record of our roots'; it is not just a loss of beauty, of freedom, or of wildlife; it is a 'loss of meaning'.<sup>623</sup>

The irony is that many do not recognise that loss, a case, one might say, of 'we do not know what we once knew'. Separated from the land, it has become something of a spectacle: still green and still pleasant, and for many, it seems, preferable to city life. 'It forms a central place in our sense of history and national identity', note Humphries and Hopwood; 'its values have appeared strong and stable in an ever-changing, restless and superficial industrial world'.<sup>624</sup> And our perceptions are fed by a 'huge and growing nostalgia industry of autobiographies, picture books, popular histories and museums', and underpinned by a powerful cultural legacy of music, film, and television, but also poems and novels.<sup>625</sup> As Bate remarks, 'at the end of the twentieth century, the two most popular English writers of the nineteenth century were Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy'.<sup>626</sup> That popularity encapsulates the 'nostalgia for the old southern shires', a nostalgia that a cynic might describe as a 'cultural disease'.<sup>627</sup>

The irony is that, whilst we might well read Hardy to confirm our bucolic view of country life, Hardy rarely obliges, as we have already seen in relation to the novels and will see again in relation to the poetry. And whilst *Time's Laughingstocks* (a later collection) is the most sustained example of Hardy's refusal to confirm our own

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<sup>622</sup> Rackham, p.26.

<sup>623</sup> Rackham, p.26.

<sup>624</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.7.

<sup>625</sup> Humphries and Hopwood, p.7.

<sup>626</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.1.

<sup>627</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, p.2.

prejudices, *Poems and the Past and Present* contains its own, wry dig at this propensity. In 'The Milkmaid' (CP126), Hardy deftly deconstructs a rural idyll:

Under a daisied bank  
There stands a rich red ruminating cow,  
And hard against her flank  
A cotton-hooded milkmaid bends her brow.

The flowery river-ooze  
Uplifts and falls; the milk purrs in the pail;  
Few pilgrims but would choose  
The peace of such a life in such a vale.

The maid breathes words – to vent,  
It seems, her sense of Nature's scenery,  
Of whose life, sentiment,  
And essence, very part itself is she.

She throws a glance of pain,  
And, at a moment, lets escape a tear;  
Is it that passing train,  
Whose alien whirr offends her country ear? –

Nay! Phyllis does not dwell

On visual and familiar things like these;

What moves her is the spell

Of inner themes and inner poetries:

Could but by Sunday morn

Her gay new gown come, meads might dry to dun,

Trains shriek till ears were torn,

If Fred would not prefer that Other One.

As with 'The Ruined Maid' (CP128), 'the ironies instruct the reader'.<sup>628</sup> And if the poem still seems fresh and relevant, it is because it is also our own assumptions that Hardy undercuts.

Whilst we continue to idealise the countryside, however, we also demonise the (post)-industrial and urban world in which we live. Our views are overshadowed and overwritten by an earlier generation of critics and commentators as diverse (and as important) as G. M. Trevelyan, Arthur Bryant, David Cecil, John Bowle, W. G. Hoskins, and Jacquetta Hawkes. They likened industrialisation to 'a barbarian invasion'; talked of 'the desecration of nature', of 'scarred land', of 'poisoned countryside'; and characterised modern cities as a 'Homer's Hell' and 'a deadening cage for the human

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<sup>628</sup> Zietlow, p.83.



spirit'.<sup>629</sup> This is our peculiarly British inheritance, and it suggests why in a nation of city-dwellers there might still be 'an extreme reluctance to recognize the fact.'<sup>630</sup>

Translated into the contemporary argot of a modern environmentally aware journal, this 'nature/ city dualism' is 'one of modernity's most persistent examples of binary thinking'.<sup>631</sup> The result is in part demographic turnaround, or counter-urbanisation, as rural-urban migration has been met (and sometimes matched) by urban-rural migration: by way of example, London's population fell between the censuses of 1951 and 1981.<sup>632</sup> But it also true that, as Hill remarks, 'almost the whole of England is within the influence of the suburbanising effects of one or more of cities;' many inhabitants of the countryside are now 'in terms of their culture and aspirations' 'de facto urban dwellers'.<sup>633</sup>

Thus, the pull of an idealised countryside has introduced to it a generation with no real understanding of or interest in it, for whom the countryside is now or has never been more than scenery. They live, but without any connection to the land in which

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<sup>629</sup> Jacquetta Hawkes, *A Land* (London: David & Charles, 1951, repr. 1978), p.214; Robert Cecil, *Life in Edwardian England* (London: Batsford, 1969), p.129; John Bowle, *England: A Portrait* (London: Ernest Benn, 1966), p.198; W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Book Club Associates, 1955, repr. 1981), p.229; Arthur Bryant, *The English Saga (1840-1940)* (London: The Reprint Society, 1942), p.156; G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries* (London: The Reprint Society, 1948), p.584 (first published 1944). As a revisionist historian remarked more recently, 'industrial landscapes have traditionally been regarded with distaste and repugnance, even with shame'; Barrie Trinder, *The Making of the Industrial Landscape* (London: J. M. Dent, 1982), p.1.

<sup>630</sup> Emrys Jones, *Towns and Cities* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966, repr. 1970), p.2.

<sup>631</sup> 'As nature's "other", the modern city stands in stark opposition to the natural world, representing the triumph of human technology and reason over non-human environmental forces.' Simon Gunn and Alastair Owens, 'Nature, technology and the modern city: an introduction', in *Cultural Geographies*, 13 (2006), 491-496 (p.496).

<sup>632</sup> Hill, p.103-4.

<sup>633</sup> Hill, p.116.

they live. They dwell, but not in the sense of what Garrard calls a 'long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work.'<sup>634</sup>

It is this sense of the land as a 'landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work' that explains Hardy attachment to it. It is reflected in the last of the 'Poems of Pilgrimage', a poem in which, ironically, Hardy refuses to make a pilgrimage. It is entitled 'On An Invitation to the United States'. In it, Hardy excuses himself from visiting a country 'free from that long drip of human tears' (l.6) precisely because his own 'ancient lands' are:

Enchased and lettered as a tomb,  
And scored with prints of perished hands,

(ll.9-11)

As I have suggested, Hardy's interest lays with 'the beauty of association', the 'mark of some human connection' (*LW*, p.124). It lies with the eco-critical concept of 'dwelling', that troubling question of how we might come to live upon the earth 'in a relation of duty and responsibility'.<sup>635</sup> As 'The Milkmaid' sardonically demonstrates, Hardy has his own way of disturbing our sense of what a right relationship might be.

Nor are poems such as these isolated exceptions. *The Athenaeum* (1902) grumbled that 'Wessex is barred out' of *Poems of the Past and Present*, and it is true that 'Tess's Lament' (CP141) is one of few poems in this collection in which Hardy

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<sup>634</sup> Garrard, p.108.

<sup>635</sup> Garrard, p.108.

engages directly with the legacy of the novels.<sup>636</sup> But a number of other poems show Hardy at work in revising and rewriting his own complex interpretation of a way of life whose meaning was knitted deep into the landscape. Whether engaging with medieval legend and the traces left behind by it, as in 'The Lost Pyx' (CP140), or linking a love story to a fallen tree whose roots bristle in the air 'like some mad Earth-god's spiny hair' ('The Tree', CP133, l.2), Hardy has a remarkable way of relating human histories to landscape. It was, perhaps, just one aspect of his restless desire to see beyond the 'clamoured code' (l.4) of 'pulpit, press and song' (l.12), and seek from the land 'in web unbroken':

Its history outwrought  
Not as the loud had spoken,  
But as the mute had thought.

(*'Mute Opinion'*, CP90, ll.13-16)

As poems like these suggest, Hardy was always striving for a richer and more complete picture of rural life.<sup>637</sup>

### **Summarizing *Poems of the Past and Present***

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<sup>636</sup> *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed. by James Gibson and Trevor Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1979, repr. 1987), p.52.

<sup>637</sup> Rural life is a subject to which Hardy returns in his 'fullest lyric presentation of the countryside', 'A Set of Country Songs'. This sequence of 18 poems appears in *Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses*, the collection of verse that follows *Poems of the Past and Present*. This is the focus of Chapter 7. Zietlow, p.85.

Like *Wessex Poems*, *Poems of the Past and Present* is characterized by variety and diversity, and Hardy himself described it (in the 'Preface') as lacking 'in cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring' (CPW1, p.113). But Hardy is only half-right, or perhaps knowingly half-wrong: misdirection is characteristic of him, and in his 'Preface' as in his poetry as a whole, he is always seeking to dislocate our expectations. There are patterns, no matter how faint; and they are peculiarly Hardyian.

*Poems of the Past and Present* is not, after all, a collection in which human history is allowed to dominate: the past overshadows the present, but only as a reminder of our own impermanence. Whilst the collection explores the human condition, it also undermines our sense of its overweening importance. One poem humbles human achievement ('Zermatt – To the Matterhorn'); another elevates the humble ('An August Midnight'). Some poems simply hand the narrative to the non-human ('The Bullfinches', 'The Caged Thrush and Home Again', 'Birds at Winter Nightfall', 'The Puzzled Game-Birds', 'Winter in Durnover Field'). One animates the inanimate ('The Last Chrysanthemum'). Several more invest the entire natural world with personality ('The Mother Mourns', 'The Lacking Sense', 'Doom and She', 'The Sleep-Worker', 'The Bullfinches'). In short, the poetry has an odd way of looking at ordinary, overlooked things; a knack of giving voice to the voiceless; a habit of juxtaposing human and non-human in a way that suggests some kind of (re)connection may yet be possible.

But there is another way of understanding how and in what ways *Poems of the Past and Present*, like *Wessex Poems* before it, develops our understanding of Hardy's complex but eloquently argued position. It is clear that Hardy's verse does not develop

or progress its argument in any straightforward or linear fashion; the poems tend to circle common themes. Yet it is also clear that they often oscillate between apparently opposed positions. Time and time again, Hardy creates oppositions, setting the irrational against the rational, the emotional against the intellectual, the subjective against the objective, and even the subconscious against the conscious. From this point of view, Hardy's poetry may be better defined as a series of tensions that coexist within a complex whole, a whole whose contradictions Hardy casually accepts as integral to it.

This is not to rule out the eco-critical tropes or themes (such as the pastoral, wilderness, and dwelling) to which Hardy's poetry has already been related. Indeed, the theme of humankind's relationship to the animal world is (as I hope I have demonstrated) central to several of the most important poems in this collection, most notably 'The Darkling Thrush'.

Nor is this to accept (or accept unthinkingly) Hynes' insistence that Hardy's entire oeuvre is defined by an unresolved Hegelian dialectic in which antithesis follows thesis without the succeeding synthesis.<sup>638</sup> There are dangers in defining Hardy in terms of neat but simplistic and unresolved oppositions. We have seen enough to suspect that the Romantic in Hardy was losing to the Realist, when in fact both were under siege by what we might now think of as the Modernist: it is there in Hardy's rejection of any kind of coherent or comprehensive world-view, and his insistence on a series of 'seemings' and 'impressions'. Indeed, in seeking to summarise those impressions, it is altogether

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<sup>638</sup> 'This idea of eternal conflict is manifested not only in the philosophical content of Hardy's poems, but also in their structure, diction, and imagery – it gives form to every aspect of substance and technique'; see Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.vii.

too easy to impose the kind of reductionistic and mechanistic thinking that eco-critics indict and Hardy's own verse resists.

Nonetheless, contrasts abound. The most obvious is captured in the collection's title, and, as I have suggested, it acts as a powerful dissolvent of human presumption. Another and still more intriguing contrast relates to the 'scientific naturalism' whose influence was so pervasive in the later nineteenth century (see Chapter 2). Hardy was, as we have seen, swift to embrace the poetic possibilities opened up by scientific discovery. Geology opened up time, and astronomy, the vastness of space. But the microscope was every bit as important as the telescope, offering its own means of exploring 'diversity and multiplicity'.<sup>639</sup> Thus, Hardy's poetry ranges effortlessly between apparently incompatible points of view, keeping in simultaneous focus both the minute and the magisterial. As Ebbatson remarked, 'homely familiarity is married to a larger cosmic view of Nature in which man is ineluctably caught up'.<sup>640</sup>

At the same time, Hardy's poetry continually tests the limits of both rationalism (which underpinned scientific naturalism) and realism (which was its main mode of expression). For Hardy, the universe was neither as closed nor as comprehensible as many of his contemporaries so confidently assumed, and 'realism' was certainly 'not Art' (*LW*, p.239). These are boundaries that his poetry everywhere tests, dissolves, destabilizes. It contrasts conscious and sub-conscious, but also natural and supernatural, rational and irrational. It compares subjective and objective, subject and object, narrator and narrated. It tests the boundary between human and non-human worlds. It explores the tension between the world of the text and the extra-textual world.

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<sup>639</sup> Richards, *English Poetry*, p.156.

<sup>640</sup> Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*, p.99.

And these tensions – these patterns – are reinforced and extended by what might with some justification be called Hardy's single greatest creative enterprise: *The Dynasts*, to which the thesis now turns.

# Chapter 6

## *The Dynasts*

### Introduction

Chapter 6 focuses on *The Dynasts*. Published between 1903 and 1908, *The Dynasts* is, to quote its sub-title in full, 'an epic-drama of the war with Napoleon in three parts, nineteen acts, and one hundred & thirty scenes' (CPW4, p.1). It represents the fullest expression of Hardy's interest in the Napoleonic wars, a fascination that had already influenced novels like *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), short stories such as 'The Melancholy Hussar' (1890), and poems, amongst them 'Valenciennes' and 'Leipzig', both of which appear in *Wessex Poems*.<sup>641</sup> It was also, in Hardy's own view, his *magnum opus*. For a brief period, this was the general consensus: writing in 1938, Rutland considered that there was 'almost universal agreement' that *The Dynasts* was 'the greatest of Hardy's writings, and the one which most clearly reveals the full stature of his creative genius'.<sup>642</sup> Today, however, few critics (or readers) would agree, and *The Dynasts* is amongst the least known and least discussed of Hardy's works.<sup>643</sup>

From this brief introduction, moreover, it may not be immediately apparent what Hardy's retelling of the Napoleonic wars has to offer an eco-critical line of inquiry. In

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<sup>641</sup> See Purdy, p.31, p.82, and CPW4, p.xi-xii.

<sup>642</sup> Rutland, p.269.

<sup>643</sup> See Gibson, p.149; Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.138.



fact, *The Dynasts* is both relevant and revealing. This is in part because, as I point out in 'Connections', the next section of the Chapter, this highly unconventional verse-drama dramatises the fate of even the tiniest creatures caught up in conflict. In so doing, *The Dynasts* provides an opportunity to explore the tension between the eco-critical tendency to focus on the local, and the global nature of environmental crisis, a discussion I take up in the following section of the Chapter, entitled 'Local and Global in *The Dynasts*'. In *The Dynasts*, however, these dimensions are united by Hardy's remarkable concept of the 'Immanent Will', and this is discussed separately, and at some length. Whilst *The Dynasts* appears to present a bleak and deterministic view of humankind, however, it nonetheless closes with the extraordinary suggestion that the Immanent Will might one day become self-aware, and this is discussed both in relation to the question of self-will and self-determinism, and in terms of the link between 'The Unconscious Will' (as Hardy also termed it) and the emerging field of eco-psychology. The penultimate section, 'Language and Form in *The Dynasts*', considers the radical way in which Hardy shapes and structures his verse-drama, whilst the 'Conclusion' reviews Hardy's remarkable achievement, and considers what it might mean in the context of humankind's current environmental predicament.

## **Connections**

War is, of course, a peculiarly human phenomenon. It may with some justification be called the supreme act of human folly. It is certainly a form of systematic predation nowhere reproduced in the natural world: humankind is the only species that

wars against itself. From an eco-feminist perspective, furthermore, war is a matter for men; and that is in itself noteworthy. It would not be too presumptuous to associate imperial ambition with the desire to master the natural world: both are a function of the masculine instincts of the coloniser and the conqueror, and both have equally catastrophic consequences for the natural world. In *The Dynasts*, the two perspectives come together in a remarkable and famous passage set on the eve of battle. In collapsing the distinction between the two, the passage also demonstrates the truth of Hynes' remark that *The Dynasts* is 'monumental and universal' but also 'attentive to existence on the smallest possible scale' (CPW4, p.xxiii).

Here, Hardy's focus switches from his human protagonists to those non-human creatures that will also fall victim to war. As the Chorus of the Pities wonders why 'the green seems opprest, and the Plain afraid', the Chorus of the Years replies:

Yea, the coneys are scared by the thud of hoofs,  
And their white scuts at their vanishing heels,  
And swallows abandon the hamlet-roofs.

The mole's tunnelled chambers are crushed by the wheels,  
The lark's eggs are scattered, their owners fled;  
And the hedgehog's household the sapper unseals.

And the snail draws in at the terrible tread,  
But in vain; he is crushed by the felloe-rim;

The worm asks what can be overhead,

And wriggles deep from a scene so grim,

And guesses him safe; for he does not know,

What a foul red flood will be soaking him!

(VIII, VI, 3, *CPW5*)<sup>644</sup>

As White asks, 'who else but Hardy would remember the earthworms on the day of the dynasts?'<sup>645</sup> Indeed, it is Hardy who recognises that the soldiers are an alien, and indeed a temporary presence:

The eyelids of eve fall together at last,

And the forms so foreign to field and tree

Lie down as though native, and slumber fast!

(VIII, VI, 3, *CPW5*, p.203)

'The most obviously personal element in his version of history', notes Turner, 'is this emphasis on animal suffering'.<sup>646</sup> Given the light that Chapter 5 has already thrown on Hardy's attitudes towards animals and animal life, this is not surprising. In the *Eve of Waterloo* passage, however, Hardy also finds a way to dramatise the idea that all life is

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<sup>644</sup> Here and throughout this discussion of *The Dynasts*, passages are identified by Scene, Act, and Part, in that order.

<sup>645</sup> R. J. White, *Thomas Hardy and History* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.88. The subject of *The Dynasts*, wrote White (p.129), is 'never simply Europe, or mankind': it is 'all sentient life'.

<sup>646</sup> Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.188.

interconnected and interdependent, whilst never losing hold of the specific and particular. The importance of Hardy's ability to combine different perspectives is discussed in the next section, which focuses first on the eco-critical preoccupation with place.

### Local and Global in *The Dynasts*

As I have pointed out in previous chapters, dwelling is a central theme in eco-critical writing. According to the post-colonial critic Rob Nixon, however, this preoccupation with place can all too easily become a self-defeating fixation on the local and specific, as opposed to the global.<sup>647</sup> In his view, 'environmental ruin' can rarely be understood (and certainly not addressed) at a purely local or national level.<sup>648</sup>

This may be true, but in practice, creating a 'genuinely global environmental movement' is extremely difficult.<sup>649</sup> It is clear that support for the environmental cause is not universal; indeed, it is not necessarily widespread. According to Rootes, an understanding of global environmental problems tends to be confined to 'the most highly educated populations of the most industrialised countries'; as a result, they 'dominate environmental movement action on global issues', and exclude those 'less highly

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<sup>647</sup> Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. by Ania Loomba and others (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp.233-251. By contrast, Nixon remarks, 'postcolonial writing and criticism largely concern themselves with displacement' and, by extension, with 'the cosmopolitan and the transnational' (p.235).

<sup>648</sup> Nixon, in *Postcolonial Studies*, p.234.

<sup>649</sup> Christopher Rootes, 'Acting Globally, Thinking Locally? Prospects for a Global Environmental Movement', in *Environmental Movements: Local, National and Global*, ed. by Christopher Rootes (London: Frank Cass, 1999, repr. 2002), pp.290-310 (p.290).

educated people' who tend to focus on local environmental action.<sup>650</sup> Furthermore, any environmentalist movement that appears to offer a 'globalising' or 'universalist' message may come to be seen, like globalisation itself, as part of the environmental problem. Campbell points out that there is growing local resistance to any kind of 'global extension of forces', which in turn generates resistance to overarching concepts such as 'The Environment'.<sup>651</sup> This is, in effect, a more developed version of Guha's critique (1989), in which he concludes that, 'despite its claims to universality, deep ecology is firmly rooted in American environmental and cultural history, and is inappropriate when applied to the Third World'.<sup>652</sup> Indeed, a more pressing problem may be that movements like Deep Ecology assume a 'distended notion of environment' that is simply too big, too diffuse. As Cooper notes, 'the environment for which we are supposed to feel reverence is nothing less than nature itself, and it is the whole natural order of which we are urged to regard ourselves as natural parts'.<sup>653</sup>

It seems, therefore, that global environmental action is a problematic as the concept ('The Environment') that underpins it. Notwithstanding Nixon's apparent confidence in the necessity and possibility of a coordinated, global response to crisis, it

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<sup>650</sup> Rootes, in *Environmental Movements*, ed. by Rootes, pp.290-310 (p.290).

<sup>651</sup> Ben Campbell, 'Environmental Cosmopolitans', in *Nature and Culture*, 1 (2008), 9-24 (p.11).

<sup>652</sup> Guha continues by saying that 'the social consequences of putting deep ecology into practice on a worldwide basis' are 'very grave indeed'; Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique', in *Environmental Ethics*, 11 (Spring 1989), 71-83 (p.71, p.72).

<sup>653</sup> D. E. Cooper, 'The Idea of Environment', in *The Environment in Question: Ethics and Global Issues*, ed. by D. E. Cooper and J. A. Palmer (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.165-180 (p.166). It may also be argued that 'the environment' is just another of those 'metanarratives' about which postmodernism has taught us to be sceptical, as in Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives', in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

is no easy thing to generate meaningful answers to a shared environmental predicament.

There are answers nonetheless. According to a 2008 discussion of 'environmental anthropology', for example, one alternative is to seek out an 'environmental cosmopolitanism' underwritten by 'a translocally applicable set of minimum rules that will enable cultural differences to be overcome in the common interest of saving the planet and its biodiversity'.<sup>654</sup> This is, in effect, an effort to escape the relativist bind by identifying certain 'context-transcendent positions' that allow overarching solutions, whilst at the same time eschewing the 'homogenizing implications carried by globalization'.<sup>655</sup>

But what kind of 'context-transcendent' cosmopolitanism might Hardy offer in his work? Nixon would say 'none', and insist that Hardy is simply a regional writer. No matter that, according to Nixon's account, that region is Wiltshire, when Wiltshire is only

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<sup>654</sup> Campbell, 'Environmental Cosmopolitans', 9-24 (p.10). In *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ursula K. Heise develops exactly this kind of 'environmental cosmopolitanism' or, in her own words, an 'eco-cosmopolitanism' that accepts 'deterritorialization' and embraces the opportunities created by 'the increasing connectedness of societies around the globe': the challenge is, as she points out, to envision an 'ecologically based advocacy [...] premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole' (p.10). Nevertheless, Heise's views are rooted in the same discourse that underpins Nixon's argument, a 'concept of "globalization"' that Heise regards as 'the central term around which theories of current politics, society and culture in the humanities and social sciences are organized' (p.4). Both take issue with what they perceive to be environmentalism's over-emphasis on the value of place, where place is interpreted to mean 'local rootedness' (p.5) or 'localism' (see, for instance, p.29); this is a perspective I will discuss later in relation to the views of Martin Spencer. Heise's argument appears to assume that an emphasis on place is at odds with the wider perspectives implied by a globalized discourse, rather in spite of the evidence of influential slogans such as 'act locally; think globally'. In fact, a 'sense of place' is by no means incompatible with what Heise calls a 'sense of planet', and her attempt to 'reach beyond the local and the national' (p.21) is entirely relevant to my discussion of Hardy; see, for example, the analysis of the 'War Poems' in Chapter 5. Indeed, Heise's emphasis on 'world wide webs' (p.15) and the 'infinite possibilities of zooming into and out of local, regional, and global views' (p.11) is singularly appropriate to the discussion of *The Dynasts* that follows, not least because Hardy's complex and fascinating work appears to anticipate both these notions.

<sup>655</sup> Campbell, 'Environmental Cosmopolitans', 9-24 (p.10, p.9).

one part of a 'Wessex' whose Hardyian epicentre is Dorset: Hardy's fictional world is essentially limited and self-limiting.<sup>656</sup>

One cannot deny Hardy's deep emotional and imaginative investment in Wessex, or the extent to which, in later life, he sought to exercise control over it. Nor can one deny that the novels present a way of life that was already fast fading – and that is hardly a basis for 'translocal' success in the face of modern environmental difficulties.

But, as I noted in relation to *Wessex Poems*, Hardy's relationship to Wessex is not necessarily straightforward. Often, the poetry appears to neglect Wessex. *The Dynasts* is different again. Wessex still features; so, in fact, do characters from the fictional world of the novels; but Wessex nonetheless plays a relatively small part in a drama whose focus is inevitably European (there are no Wessex scenes whatsoever in the middle volume of the three).<sup>657</sup> Indeed, one might argue that, in contrast to what could be construed as the closed world of the novels, *The Dynasts* looks outwards. Its cast is as cosmopolitan as its settings: scene by scene, the action switches from place to place, country to country. Furthermore, Hardy extends the hawk-like perspective first introduced in poems such as "In vision I roamed". This aerial vantage point provides *The Dynasts* with one of its most characteristic, cinematic, and consequently modern effects.

It is also, perhaps, one of its most beautiful. Seen from 'mid-air', the Danube 'shows itself as a crinkled satin riband' (II, III, 1, *CPW4*, p.90). Over the 'wide liquid plain' between England and Spain, 'four groups of moth-like transport and war ships are discovered silently skimming': they 'float on before the wind almost imperceptibly, like

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<sup>656</sup> Nixon, in *Postcolonial Studies*, p.239.

<sup>657</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.406.

preened duck-feathers across a pond' (V, II, 2, *CPW4*, p.255, p.257). By night, London and Paris 'seem each as a little swarm of lights surrounded by a halo' (a description to whose accuracy the modern aviator can testify) (II, I, 2, *CPW4*, p.197). Europe is 'disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs' (Fore Scene, 1, *CPW4*, p.20).

Yet these same stage directions – 'the real heart of the epic' – are also full of masterly details picked out with an extraordinary imaginative and linguistic precision.<sup>658</sup> 'Bullets snap like stones on window panes' (IV, VII, 3, *CPW5*, p.222); stars are glimpsed 'flashing like stilettos' (XI, I, 3, *CPW5*, p.50); as Moscow burns, 'large pieces of canvas aflame sail away on the gale like balloons', and:

Cocks crow, thinking it sunrise, ere they are burnt to death.

(VII, I, 3, *CPW5*, p.37)

The effect is to combine the universal and the particular, but also to blur the boundaries that might make sense of nations and of nationhood. Wessex is only one part of this remarkable depiction.

So, whilst Hardy wrote his epic out of experiences that were local, and rooted in his native Dorset, he was simultaneously able to write outside of them, creating a work that is at once local, yet global.<sup>659</sup> It is in effect (if not intent) analogous to – and it

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<sup>658</sup> Robert Gittings, *Thomas Hardy* (London, Penguin: 2001), p.518; this is a single volume reprint, with revisions, of Gittings' two-volume biography, first published in 1975 and 1978.

<sup>659</sup> According to Hynes, the sources of Hardy's interest lay in the memories and recollections of those he had known as a child, and in the physical evidence he was still able to detect in the countryside around him, from abandoned encampments to a bullet-ridden door 'extemporised by a solitary man as a target



certainly acts as a reminder of – one of the most famous of Green rallying cries: 'act locally; think globally.'<sup>660</sup>

This slogan has for years defined a politics – and more recently, informed a theoretical approach – that is perfectly capable of looking beyond the immediate and specific issues of a particular locale or location. This is not to underestimate the practical difficulties associated with creating a viable 'global' form of environmentalism. Nor is it to ignore the self-evident truth that 'the global, the national, the regional and the local constantly and increasingly interpenetrate'.<sup>661</sup> It is simply to insist on the importance of place in providing a point of orientation: only if rooted in the local, the tangible, the specific, and the particular can environmentalism make a difference by seeing a difference.

In fact, it is humankind's increasing 'rootlessness' that may be its undoing, a possibility that eco-critics recognise precisely because of their engagement with what Nixon calls 'ethics-of-place environmentalism'.<sup>662</sup> Indeed, Nixon's argument simply does not do justice to the complex eco-critical dialogue between what it is to value place whilst recognizing that *dis*-placement is a growing global reality. Hardy's *The Dynasts* itself sketches the tragedy of refugees who flee before battle, and whether from war, famine, or natural disaster, this is a fate that is still visited daily on the peoples of the world. Furthermore, a sense of displacement may be no less real for being 'virtual'. In

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for firelock practice when the landing was hourly expected'. His pursuit of this physical testimony – of a story 'inscribed on and below the surface of the earth' – later led him to visit Waterloo, 'in search of the earth's memories'. Preface to *The Trumpet Major*, in *CPW4*, p.xii; also p.xii & p.xiii.

<sup>660</sup> The phrase 'Think Globally, Act Locally' was reportedly coined by the founder of 'Friends of the Earth', David Brower, in 1969, although it has also been attributed to Rene Dubos, an advisor to the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972.

<sup>661</sup> Rootes, pp.290-310 (p.299).

<sup>662</sup> Nixon, in *Postcolonial Studies*, p.237.

advanced industrialised countries of the kind whose making Hardy witnessed – countries that today remain relatively stable and affluent – this feeling of displacement can still be very strong. In societies such as our own, harassed by a sense of what Hardy called ‘the irrepressible New’ (*RN*, p.6), and apparently intent on the restless and relentless pursuit of the inconsequential, one might well wonder if we are not all somehow dis-located.<sup>663</sup> (This feeling may in itself underwrite the nation’s continuing predilection for idealised visions of a settled and rooted country life.)

It is not my intention, of course, to suggest that this was a debate that Hardy consciously anticipated in his writing; but as a brilliantly imagined vision of life entire, *The Dynasts* is nonetheless particularly intriguing. Whatever the extent or nature of that feeling of dislocation, we remain connected; we remain part of what Hardy called ‘one great network or tissue’, bound up with and dependent on the destinies of all the other living beings with whom we share the planet.<sup>664</sup>

Sometimes, of course, the beings on which we depend are tiny, even microscopic; in the words of E. O. Wilson, bugs are the ‘little things that rule the world’.<sup>665</sup> They are also easily overlooked, although not by Hardy: as White remarks, *The Dynasts* ‘has the simultaneous largeness and smallness of a world which apprehends the macrocosm through the microcosm’.<sup>666</sup> We have seen it demonstrated

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<sup>663</sup> Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide*, p.137; for an instance of Hardy’s depiction of refugees (‘men, women, and their children fly’), see II, II, 3, *CPW5*, p.62. American environmental critics make much of Thoreau’s *Walden*, and there is certainly a degree of continuing relevance to his remark that ‘the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation’; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), p.11.

<sup>664</sup> Hardy’s comments originate in a lengthy entry in *The Life*, dated March, 1886, in which he discusses ideas that were later to inform *The Dynasts*; *LW*, p.183.

<sup>665</sup> Quoted in Des Jardins, p.122.

<sup>666</sup> White, *Thomas Hardy and History*, p.128.

in the 'Eve of Waterloo' passage that makes of 'nature and man a single strand'.<sup>667</sup> And whilst Merryn Williams remarks that Hardy's frequent use of a lofty aerial perspective undercuts humankind's importance ('indeed a human life may seem to count for no more than an insect's') this is exactly the reason why Hardy is eco-critically relevant: few other great writers of his or any generation would suggest that human life really does not count for more – or less – than that of an invertebrate.<sup>668</sup>

Hardy's point is, however, a wider one, as he declares at the very outset of *The Dynasts*. As the spirits look down on the drama's 'Fore Scene', 'a new and penetrating light' exhibits 'as one organism the anatomy of life and movement in all humanity and vitalized matter' (Fore Scene, 1, CPW4, p.21). The spirits (a Shade of the Earth amongst them) see what the players do not: the 'fibrils, veins,'

Will-tissues, nerves, and pulses of the Cause,  
That heave throughout the Earth's compositure.  
(Fore Scene, 1, CPW4, p. 21)

This is, of course, 'the anatomy' of what Hardy calls 'the Immanent Will' whose 'strange waves', 'twining and serpentine round and through' 'complicate with some, and balance all' (Fore Scene, 1, CPW4, p.21). This remarkable concept forms the subject of the next section.

### Hardy's 'Immanent Will'

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<sup>667</sup> Evelyn Hardy, p.7.

<sup>668</sup> Merryn Williams, 'The Dynasts', in *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 19.1 (2003), 39-53 (p.49-50).

In both *Wessex Poems* and *Poems of the Past and Present*, Hardy is shown wrestling with the complex inheritance of a concept of 'Nature' that more modern thinking had left behind. It reappears here, in *The Dynasts*, where Hardy talks about 'Dame Nature', that 'lay-shape' upon which humankind was once accustomed to 'hang phenomena' (VI, I, 1, *CPW4*, p.55), encumbering it with ideas and expectations. In lieu, he offers 'the Immanent, that urgeth all', and 'rules what may or may not befall!' (V, II, 1, *CPW4*, p.80). Lacking 'right or reason', its 'terms inexorable' (VI, I, 1, *CPW4*, p.56, p.55) nonetheless dictate the shape and nature all of existence.

At once, as earlier, a preternatural clearness possesses the atmosphere of the battle-field, in which the scene becomes anatomized and the living masses of humanity transparent. The controlling Immanent Will appears therein, as a brain-like network of currents and ejections, twitching, interpenetrating, entangling, and thrusting hither and thither the human forms. (III, VI, 1, *CPW4*, p.160)

As Hynes and Pinion note, the concept of an Immanent Will or 'First Cause' had already appeared under different names (such as a 'Vast Imbecility' or an 'Automaton') in both poems and novels.<sup>669</sup> In the most general terms, the concept owes something to Schopenhauer; more specifically, it adapts even as it radically modifies von Hartmann, and his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, first published in 1868.<sup>670</sup> The

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<sup>669</sup> Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.158; Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, pp.176-8.

<sup>670</sup> See Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, pp.178, 189 & 182-3, and Robert Schweik, 'The influence of religion, science, and philosophy on Hardy's writings', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*,

connections are, however, indistinct, and whilst Hardy's idea owes much to the late nineteenth-century intellectual milieu, the use he makes of it is quite his own, and, to quote Gittings, 'highly eclectic'.<sup>671</sup>

Hardy's concept of an Immanent Will could, of course, be mistaken for another symbolic device in a highly stylised prose-poem. Hardy's spirit chorus is certainly imaginary, 'contrivances of the fancy merely' (Preface, *CPW4*). The Immanent Will, however, is not, although Hardy's Spirits in part exist to draw attention to it; like any natural phenomenon, the Immanent Will speaks no language we can readily understand, even if we were inclined to listen for it.

Nor does the Immanent Will form part of the 'supernatural framework' Hardy always had in mind for *The Dynasts* (*LW*, p.183). It is, instead, one of the 'true realities of life, hitherto called abstractions' (*LW*, p.183). And whilst Hardy undoubtedly set out to find some substitute for now spent 'old theologies', the Immanent Will is no more a metaphysical concept than it is a metaphorical device (*LW*, p.344). Through the concept of the Immanent Will, Hardy insists that the links that bind living things are real even if invisible to us. As he stated categorically in an explanatory letter of 1907, there is 'no Will outside the Mass – that is, the Universe'.<sup>672</sup> He remains 'rigorously faithful to his monistic vision'.<sup>673</sup>

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ed. by Kramer, pp. 54-72 (p.68-70). Schweik is careful to note that the connections are limited and comparisons speculative, and that what can be said 'with greatest certainty' is that their work either confirmed Hardy in views that he had 'arrived at independently or that he might earlier have derived from Mill, Spencer, and Huxley, and others' (p.70). Schweik's remarks are in part a measured response to earlier analyses of *The Dynasts* such as J. O. Bailey's *Thomas Hardy and the Cosmic Mind: A New Reading of The Dynasts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956).

<sup>671</sup> Gittings, p.517.

<sup>672</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

<sup>673</sup> Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.163.

Nonetheless, we have moved far beyond the Eve of Waterloo passage in which Hardy simply dramatises the interrelationship of all forms of life. Indeed, his concept of a 'First or Fundamental Energy' (Preface, *CPW4*, p.7) at work in the universe has its modern parallel in a hypothesis first postulated in the 1970s: that 'the earth's living matter, air, oceans, and land surface form a complex system which can be seen as a single organism and which has the capacity to keep our planet a fit place for life'.<sup>674</sup> It is, in short, analogous to James Lovelock's concept of 'gaia'.

This is not, of course, to suggest any kind of direct relationship between the two ideas. In origin, at least, they are very different. Hardy's philosophy might reasonably be described as a sceptic's substitute for that short-lived and 'local cult called Christianity':

Beyond whose span, uninfluenced, unconcerned,

The systems of the suns go sweeping on

(VI, I, 1, *CPW4*, p.54)

By contrast, Lovelock's gaia is a scientific premise built upon close observation of certain otherwise anomalous trends or tendencies apparent in the natural world: it is the case for biological (self)-regulation of climate. Yet gaia itself has come to be seen in certain, less scrupulously scientific circles as its own form of religion. The gap between the two ideas – Hardy's and Lovelock's – begins to close. Insofar as both attempt to explain the universe and our role or relative (un)importance within it, E. O. Wilson's

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<sup>674</sup> James Lovelock (1979), quoted in *The Green Reader*, ed. by Andrew Dobson (London: André Deutsch, 1991), p.265.

observation is relevant: 'science is religion liberated and writ large'.<sup>675</sup> It is tempting to see the ideas of both Hardy and Lovelock as a kind of 'stoic's creed'.<sup>676</sup> But the relationship between the two ideas may be closer still: one critic of Hardy, F. R. Southerington, suggests that 'the Will includes the totality of all actions in the universe, including even what we think of as the physical, non-sentient world'.<sup>677</sup>

The exact nature of the correspondence between Hardy's 'Immanent Will' and Lovelock's 'gaia' is, in the last analysis, less important than the relevance of Hardy's idea to the environmentalist concerns I have highlighted throughout this thesis. Weaving all living matter together in a single web, it resolves (at a stroke) the tension between local and global highlighted by critics like Nixon. In addition, Hardy's 'ontological assumption of oneness and wholeness' directly challenges that sense of ourselves as separate and superior that has 'driven Western models of progress and science since the time of Francis Bacon'.<sup>678</sup> In context, it represents an early and decisive break with the dominant dualistic model so often cited as a reason for our current environmental crisis. It also represents a move towards the relational model advocated by Arne Naess. In addition, it suggests a linked awareness that, to borrow a term from modern biology and from quantum physics, relationships are constitutive.

Indeed, by insisting on the dynamic and active interrelatedness of all life, it would seem to sidestep (if not solve) a major problem for those who seek to construct an eco-centric or all-encompassing environmental ethic: establishing why the non-human world

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<sup>675</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, repr. 2000), p.6.

<sup>676</sup> Wilson, *Consilience*, p.6.

<sup>677</sup> F. R. Southerington, *Hardy's Vision of Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), p.160.

<sup>678</sup> Jonathon Porritt, *Playing Safe: Science and the Environment* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p.126.

can be said to possess intrinsic value or inherent worth. Confronted with the living reality of interdependence, the issue ceases to be important. If interconnected – if aware of the relational field in which we are situated – we will no more damage the environment than we would injure ourselves. Furthermore, it is through just this kind of constitutive, rewarding relationship that we may recognise and respond to the wildness in ourselves, that linking element that connects us directly to the non-human world. (Naess calls this recognition self-realisation.)

From an eco-critical perspective, therefore, Hardy's concept of the Immanent Will is central to his importance. Indeed, when Campbell argues for 'a translocally applicable set of minimum rules that will enable cultural differences to be overcome in the common interest of saving the planet and its biodiversity', one cannot help but think of the Immanent Will, Hardy's own 'relational field'.<sup>679</sup> In the words of one work on Deep Ecology, 'to solve real-world environmental problems, then, requires not the development of a new ethical theory but a new worldview, a new philosophy of the relationship between humanity and nature.'<sup>680</sup>

The question remains: is such a philosophy in itself enough? It might seem obvious that, if humankind is to mend its ways and take positive and meaningful steps to address the damage it continues to do to the environment, it is necessary that it recognise the extent to which all life is interconnected and interdependent: but it is not so certain that such a belief will of itself persuade humankind to take action. We might regard it as a necessary prerequisite, but it may not be sufficient.

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<sup>679</sup> Campbell, 'Environmental Cosmopolitans', 9-24 (p.10).

<sup>680</sup> Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg, *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p.iv.



In fact, there is another, chilling possibility. I have assumed that this kind of awareness will reconnect us with our 'inner wildness', and help to restore a reciprocal relationship with the non-human world. However, it may be that our inner wildness is not so inclined. Garrard notes that, for many Deep Ecologists and eco-critics, 'the assumption of indigenous environmental virtue is a foundational belief.'<sup>681</sup> This is the stereotype of the 'ecological Indian': the belief that 'primitive' peoples live in inevitable harmony with their environment. The reality may be that, as Lovelock remarks, we are 'disputatious tribal animals with dreams of conquest even of other planets'.<sup>682</sup>

As a species, it may be argued, we are bound to follow a pattern of behaviour that emphasises short-term reward over long-term self-preservation. We respect the environment only when it forces respect upon us. The moment that our technology is able to insulate us from the environment, we cease to care for or about it. We are by our very nature exploitative in attitude, selfish, short-termist: and perhaps because of it we are, in the words of the Chorus of the Years, 'so transient a race!' (I, III, 1, *CPW4*, p.90) If this kind of behaviour is an inescapable part of what it is to be human, the environmentalist might argue, there is no hope for humankind: and as I discuss in the next section, this is exactly the possibility with which Hardy wrestles in *The Dynasts*.

### **Self-Determinism and Self-Awareness in *The Dynasts***

It is one of the more frightening implications of *The Dynasts* that the destiny of humankind is fixed, and fixed by pre-determined patterns of behaviour. In Hardy's epic-

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<sup>681</sup> Garrard, p.120.

<sup>682</sup> James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p.146.

drama, humankind is allowed little room for any kind of self-determinism. It is true that, as Williams remarks, Hardy rejects the 'undemocratic notion' that history is driven by the acts 'of a few great men', but neither does he empower the many: all are helpless.<sup>683</sup> Humans act in a mass, 'writhing, crawling, heaving, and vibrating in their various cities and nationalities', or like sleep-walkers steered by a committee of spirits whose chorus-like chants cast a strange spell over the scene, and even make a puppet of Napoleon:

As puppet-watchers him who pulls the strings. –

You'll mark the twitchings of this Bonaparte

As he with other figures foots his reel,

(Fore Scene, 1, *CPW4*, p.20)

And as White remarks, 'a puppet can scarcely be saddled with moral responsibility'.<sup>684</sup>

This denial of human agency – this radical decentring of the human – may in part explain *The Dynasts*' failure to capture the imagination of later readers steeped in a liberal literary tradition built on the illusion of free will; of individual self-importance; of our own uniqueness. Humans would rather dream:

Their motions free, their orderings supreme;

Each life apart from each, with power to mete

Its own day's measures; balanced, self-complete;

(Fore Scene, 1, *CPW4*, p.21)

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<sup>683</sup> Merryn Williams, 'The Dynasts', 39-53 (p.43).

<sup>684</sup> White, *Thomas Hardy and History*, p.98.

But Hardy's willingness to expose this as a dream counts as a reason for eco-critical interest. Indeed, this 'history of human automatism' would seem to point to a simple truth: that human history is a tale of rise and inevitable fall (*LW*, p.158). The very title of *The Dynasts* alludes to it: it was (most likely) prompted, Hardy remarked (1906), by a line 'in the *Magnificat* – "He hath cast down the dynasts from their thrones".<sup>685</sup> Perhaps it is also our destiny to destroy our environment and ourselves with it: the evidence of the twentieth century would seem to suggest it. Seen as a species, humankind is, in the words of *The Dynasts*, an 'unnatural Monster', with an 'Apocalyptic Being's shape' (V, VI, 3, *CPW5*, p.192).

As Garrard notes, there is strong strain of just this kind of apocalyptic thinking in environmentally orientated writing. This includes the increasingly pessimistic work of James Lovelock, whose more recent thinking suggests that humankind is threatened 'with the ultimate punishment of extinction'.<sup>686</sup> Insofar as it is intended to alert humankind to the potential risk of its current patterns of behaviour, however, this kind of tone tends to be self defeating: if apocalypse is inevitable, then nothing can be done to avert it; if our behaviour has been (bio)determined, we should – indeed can only – accept it, and accept that our tenure here on Earth will be a brief and ultimately most unhappy one.

But this is not quite Hardy's position, for two reasons. Firstly, he believed that humankind might still possess a 'modicum of free will' with which to decide its own fate,

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<sup>685</sup> Letter of 20 February 1906, *CL3*, p.197.

<sup>686</sup> Lovelock, *Revenge*, p.147.

and shape for itself a better and more peaceful future.<sup>687</sup> This was a view he maintained even after the great apocalypse of his time, a war poignantly called 'the war to end all wars'. Humankind still has the chance to choose, and choose responsibly. (Whether or not there are any options still left to us is a question to which I will return in the Chapter's concluding section.)

Secondly, Hardy allowed for the extraordinary possibility that the Immanent Will (that stirs and urges all) might itself develop a degree of self-awareness. In the closing pages of *The Dynasts*, he describes how an emerging collective consciousness might one day animate the 'web Enorm' (After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.252). As the Spirit of the Pities declares:

Men gained cognition with the flux of time,  
And wherefore not the Force informing them,

(After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.251)

So, in the final Chorus on the last page, *The Dynasts* concludes:

But – a stirring thrills the air  
Like to sounds of joyance there  
That the rages  
Of the ages  
Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the darts that were,

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<sup>687</sup> 'Apology' to the *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (CP, p.558).

Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashions all things fair!

(After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.255)

'That the Unconscious Will of the Universe is growing aware of Itself', Hardy remarked, 'I believe I may claim as my own idea solely'.<sup>688</sup> To contemporaries who had lost their religious faith, this was all the hope that Hardy could offer: the tiny possibility that this 'Loveless, Hateless' entity might mend its careless ways, and for 'loving-kindness' sake offer its 'sentient subjects' some 'genial germinating purpose' (After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.254, p.255). Then, 'these pale panting multitudes':

Seen surging here, their moils, their moods,

All shall "fulfil their joy" in Thee,

In Thee abide eternally!

(After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.253)

Yet the Immanent Will, as Hardy elsewhere stresses, is not set apart from the mass of humankind: as he remarked in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement*, published 19 February, 1904, it reflects 'a sense that humanity and other animal life' form 'the conscious extremity of a pervading urgency, or will'.<sup>689</sup>

Will that wills above the will of each,

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<sup>688</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

<sup>689</sup> Letter to *The Times Literary Supplement*, published 19 February, 1904, in *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.200.

Yet but the will of all conjunctively.

(V, I, 3, CPW5, p.31)

Perhaps, then, its growing consciousness may prompt in us a collective realisation that our actions affect the environment in ways that benefit the few and compromise the many. Perhaps (to quote Richardson) 'consciousness, and responsibility, will come to the process of – and the players in – history'.<sup>690</sup> As the Chorus of the Pities sings (in 'aerial music') to the Shade of the Earth:

We would establish those of kindlier build,  
In fair Compassions skilled,  
Men of deep art in life-development;  
Watchers and warders of thy varied lands,  
Men surfeited of laying heavy hands  
Upon the innocent,  
The mild, the fragile, the obscure content  
Among the myriads of thy family.

(Fore Scene, 1, CPW4, p.16-17)

At the time, Hardy's contemporaries were 'profoundly grateful' that he chose to end *The Dynasts* on an optimistic note – 'the only tolerable, the inevitable right note', in

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<sup>690</sup> Angelique Richardson, 'Hardy and science: a chapter of accidents', in *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. by Mallett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.156-180 (p.173).

the words of one reviewer.<sup>691</sup> The concept of an entity slowly coming to its senses remains, however, an astonishing and audacious idea. Indeed, its full expression was to some extent constrained by the limits of language. As Hardy remarked of the word 'Will', it was chosen 'for want of a better', accepting that it did not 'perfectly fit the idea to be conveyed'.<sup>692</sup> A better explanation of Hardy's meaning is suggested by another of the phrases he used to describe this 'vague thrusting or urging force in no predetermined direction': the Unconscious Will.<sup>693</sup> This in turn suggests another, fruitful line of inquiry for the interpretation of this text. The idea of an unconscious (as opposed to conscious) force overlaps with a number of developing concepts within the field of eco-psychology, and these are discussed in the next section.

### **'The Unconscious Will' and Eco-Psychology**

Eco-psychology is a green-thinking response to conventional forms of psychology whose roots lie (it is argued) in a continuing overemphasis on what might simply be described as urban angst.<sup>694</sup> This is to miss the point that the city is not our natural habitat. As E. O. Wilson remarks, 'how could our relation to nature, on which survival depended minute by minute for millions of years, not in some way be reflected

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<sup>691</sup> Harold Child, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 27 February 1908, in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, pp.366-371, p.370.

<sup>692</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

<sup>693</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

<sup>694</sup> Theodore Rozak, 'Where Psyche Meets Gaia', in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Theodore Rozak, and others (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), pp.1-20 (p.2).

in the rules of cognitive development that generate the human mind?<sup>695</sup> Psychology's failure to look beyond the 'city limits' may explain why it has signally failed to create a healthier society in those advanced industrialised countries that are in every material respect blessed.<sup>696</sup>

As eco-psychologists point out, the conventional study of human psychology (another consequence of the specialisation and professionalization that came to characterise science in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century) depends on a clear-cut differentiation between self and other. It reflects in part Descartes' insistence that, by contrast, animals 'have no consciousness, not even the sensation of pain'.<sup>697</sup> But modern discoveries have blurred that boundary, identifying in the animal kingdom levels of awareness – of sentience – that demonstrate 'deep similarities between humans and animals'.<sup>698</sup> Conversely, human identity is rooted in an unconscious whose author or authors we cannot easily identify, an unconscious which may link us to the animal kingdom in ways we cannot properly understand. Furthermore, humankind's psychological susceptibility to pharmaceuticals – its chemical dependencies – hint at the extent to which psychology depends on biology. Put another way, mind appears inseparable from matter: and if no limit can be set on the subject, Hillman suggests, then by default, psychology merges with ecology.<sup>699</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Edward O. Wilson, 'Arousing Biophilia: A Conversation with E.O. Wilson' (1990) at *EnviroArts: Orion Online* < [http://arts.envirolink.org/interviews\\_and\\_conversations/EOWilson.html](http://arts.envirolink.org/interviews_and_conversations/EOWilson.html) > [accessed 6 March 2009].

<sup>696</sup> Rozak, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.1-20 (p.2).

<sup>697</sup> James Hillman, 'A Psyche the Size of the Earth', in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.xvii-xxiii (p.viii).

<sup>698</sup> Hillman, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.xvii-xxiii (p.viii).

<sup>699</sup> Hillman, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.xvii-xxiii (p.xx). For a recent, populist account of modern science whose argument independently overlaps with views of eco-psychologists such as Hillman, see Christopher Potter, *You Are Here: A Portable History of the Universe* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), pp.267-8.



On this (tentative) basis, it is even possible to locate memory 'as much in the world' as in the mind, and to recuperate as 'nonhuman subjectivity' what has hitherto been 'denigrated as superstitious animism'; even to believe that, as the Spirit of the Pities declares, 'each has parcel in the total Will', and forms part of a 'Brain whose whole connotes the Everywhere' (Fore Scene, *CPW4*, p.17, p.21).<sup>700</sup> 'Everything is part of the Will', remarks Southerington, and that includes 'unconscious being'.<sup>701</sup>

Naturally, the sceptic may demur at ideas as radical as the eco-psychologist's concept of 'environmental reciprocity'.<sup>702</sup> But as we have seen, our own concept of the universe as itself rational has been undermined by scientific concepts of 'indeterminism, spontaneity, and chaos'.<sup>703</sup> In Hardy's own lifetime, scientific discoveries were coming to seem more irrational than rational, and the universe, as Hardy later put it, as 'too comic for words'.<sup>704</sup> Science today offers explanations so bizarre 'that the gap between mystery and mystical barely seems apparent'.<sup>705</sup> Hardy's 'operative force' may be a 'non-teleological energy', but Lovelock found it necessary to rework his original gaia hypothesis because he had overlooked the still more extraordinary possibility that his self-regulating system had a goal: 'the regulation of surface conditions so as always to be as favourable as possible for contemporary life'.<sup>706</sup> Hardy's idea (that the Will was 'growing aware of itself') does not therefore seem so improbable.<sup>707</sup> As one recent

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<sup>700</sup> Hillman, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.xvii-xxiii (p.xxi).

<sup>701</sup> Southerington, p.164.

<sup>702</sup> Rozak, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak, pp.1-20 (p.6.)

<sup>703</sup> Sheldrake, p.5.

<sup>704</sup> Letter of 31 December, 1919, in *CL5*, p.353. As Schweik notes, Hardy lived long enough to take note of 'a radically new physics' and of Einstein's theories. Schweik, in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.54-72 (p.60).

<sup>705</sup> Potter, p.149.

<sup>706</sup> Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p.163; Lovelock, *Revenge*, p.162.

<sup>707</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

history of science asks, 'is consciousness the universe becoming aware of itself for the first time?'<sup>708</sup>

In part, therefore, Hardy's bold ideas have their origin in the growing realisation that that the universe could not be explained with unequivocal certainty: by the end of the century, 'the limits of science were increasingly discussed'.<sup>709</sup> As Hardy remarked (1901), 'my own interest lies largely in non-rationalistic subjects, since non-rationality seems, so far as one can perceive, to be the principle of the Universe' (*LW*, p.332). But Hardy's recognition of this striking shift also affects his handling of language and form in *The Dynasts*. If reason was not in itself sufficient to explain the bewildering workings of the universe, then perhaps 'realist' forms of expression were not an adequate means of depicting it. In the next section, the discussion turns to the way in which Hardy therefore eschews a realist approach in favour of a highly mannered and layered style that combines multiple viewpoints and multiple forms.

### Language and Form in *The Dynasts*

For Hardy, the essence of realism was an 'attempted scientific objectivity' that could not but fail.<sup>710</sup> As he remarked in 'The Science of Fiction' (1891), the scientific realist cannot escape 'the exercise of Art': 'not until he becomes an automatic

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<sup>708</sup> Potter, p.269.

<sup>709</sup> See Wilson, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp.201-215 (p.207-8); Barrow, p.49.

<sup>710</sup> Richard Nemesvari, 'Hardy and his readers', in *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. by Mallett, pp.38-74 (p.38, p.55).

reproducer of all impressions whatsoever can he be called purely scientific, or even a manufacturer on scientific principles.<sup>711</sup>

Where Hardy tests the limits of scientific naturalism, therefore, he also tests the limits of conventional forms of literary expression. This is a theme I have discussed in relation to both *Wessex Poems* and *Poems of the Past and Present*, but it is equally if not more relevant to my analysis of *The Dynasts*, whose style, shape and structure place it amongst the most radical works in the English language. (It is, as Widdowson remarks, a 'non-realist' text.<sup>712</sup>)

In the last Chapter, I referred to what eco-critics have called the 'crisis of representation', and cited Bate's remark that we cannot overlook the fact that 'nature is a word, not a thing'.<sup>713</sup> I also suggested, however, that in both *Wessex Poems* and *Poems of the Past and Present*, Hardy disrupts the surface of the text as if to draw attention to it. Where Bate, extrapolating from Heidegger, suggests that poetry – 'a form of being not of mapping' – may be exempted from and therefore enable us to circumvent this enframing 'cage of words', Hardy's use of language and literary forms forces itself on the reader's attention.<sup>714</sup> Nature is a word, Bate says, not a thing: but the words on a page are also things, and no less part of the world than the world to which they refer. Whether we talk of signified or signifier, each has a material existence. To some extent, then, we can reclaim word as world, collapsing the difference between signifier and signified by pointing out that, at a practical, day-to-day

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<sup>711</sup> *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.107. 'Realism', Hardy added, 'is an unfortunate, an ambiguous word' (p.108).

<sup>712</sup> Peter Widdowson, *Thomas Hardy* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), p.77.

<sup>713</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.247, p.248.

<sup>714</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.262. See also John Parham, 'The Poverty of Ecocritical Theory: E. P. Thompson and the British Perspective', in *New Formations (Earthographies: Ecocriticism and Culture)*, 64 (2008), 25-36 (p.28).

level, the difference is immaterial and irrelevant, and to discuss it is itself symptomatic (indeed part) of the problem. This dualism is of itself false, certainly unnecessary, and undeniably unhelpful.

But still, the word is not the thing: in the words of one recent article, the nonhuman world remains and must be recognised 'as a compelling domain of fact external to human construct and cultural value'.<sup>715</sup> Rather than insist on a transparent 'realism' that pretends a precise correspondence between world and word, then, perhaps it is important that, through disjunction and disruption, the writer reminds the reader that the word is not the world, and may conceal as well as reveal. If (to borrow Kerridge's observation), 'the real is that which disrupts representation', then this is of itself a legitimate eco-critical technique.<sup>716</sup>

It certainly seems to be Hardy's. Critics and readers occasionally balk at his sometimes discomfiting handling of language, but perhaps his intention was to confront the reader with the artificiality of the text, whilst nonetheless insisting on the materiality of the world it sought to represent. But there is another aspect of Hardy's handling of the language that in turn suggests a different interpretation: his habit of pushing language to what we might call the limit of its carrying capacity. This is particularly apparent in *The Dynasts*. Turner calls the epic-drama 'grandly austere', but admits a range of diction from the purely colloquial to the grandly over-inflated, and of a prosodic invention that ranges from iambic-anapaestic triplets to octameter stanzas.<sup>717</sup> Gibson and Gittings note 'thirty separate rhyme schemes'; Taylor counts 'over forty different

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<sup>715</sup> Campbell, 'Environmental Cosmopolitans', 9-24 (p.11).

<sup>716</sup> Richard Kerridge, in the Introduction to *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, p.3.

<sup>717</sup> Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.184, p.191.

metrical forms'.<sup>718</sup> Odd, unusual, and forgotten phrases surface and resurface: on the very first page, for example, the reader encounters (amongst other oddities) 'pulsion', for impulsion, and 'Byss', which derives from the Greek for 'bottom of the sea', but is also a 'technical term used by the mystical philosopher Boehme for "the Being of all Beings"'.<sup>719</sup>

This complexity is itself significant. Another approach to the imprisoning 'cage of words' is to reflect on the way that words themselves form part of a 'world' analogous to our own. Language is itself like a living organism or eco-system; complex, evolving, and unstable, its vigour or health might be measured by its diversity. Indeed, there is a kind of correspondence between biodiversity and the diversity of a language. We cannot register one without the other. There are many words for things in nature, and when we forget and lose them, it may be argued, a loss of biodiversity also follows. It is as if, in the forgetting, we also forget the value of these things; because those things are now unremarked, the loss literally becomes unremarkable. Without words, it is difficult to register loss. But it is also true, and perhaps this is the more terrible truth, that we have also lost species whose names we never knew, and continue to lose species like them.

Hardy's sense of language as a living thing, and his keen awareness that its diversity is a measure of its health, may help to explain his own attempts to enrich it with a variety of unusual elements, some imported from abroad, some recovered from the past, and some his own invention. And the form of *The Dynasts* is also and undeniably

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<sup>718</sup> Gibson, p.149; Gittings (p.510) is following Elizabeth Cathcart Hickson, *The Versification of Thomas Hardy* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 1931). Dennis Taylor, 'Hardy as a nineteenth-century poet', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.183-203 (p.201).

<sup>719</sup> Forescene, 1, CPW4, p.14; Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.184.

original. Whether or not it inaugurates a new phase of modernist experimentation, as some suggest, it is certainly remarkable for its non-realistic or anti-realistic elements (such as its supernatural apparatus) and its deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries that separate genre.<sup>720</sup> Hardy claimed to be 'following Coleridge in holding that a long poem should not attempt to be poetical all through', but *The Dynasts* does more than juxtapose prose and poetry: mixing ballads, blank verse, dialogue, 'dumb shows' and songs, it is in fact an 'epic-drama' for which Hardy wrote stage directions whilst never intending it for performance (*LW*, p.212). 'By all the rules *The Dynasts* should be chaos, a drama impossible to act', wrote one contemporary critic, 'a book impossible to read'.<sup>721</sup> But for this reviewer and others, the form of *The Dynasts* was essential to its success: indeed, 'looking back now, it is difficult to see in what other form Mr. Hardy could have done what he set out to do'.<sup>722</sup> As Rutland remarked (and his comment is singularly appropriate to my interpretation of the work):

When Hardy wrote the *Dynasts* he tried to make us see a vision of the universe, and of all living things striving and suffering, appearing and vanishing ceaselessly therein. To this end he summoned all the resources of his technique, both as lyric poet and as realistic novelist; and his work owes no small part of its greatness to the persistent concentration of all these means to this one end.<sup>723</sup>

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<sup>720</sup> John Paul Riquelme, 'The modernity of Thomas Hardy's poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Kramer, pp.204-223 (p.211).

<sup>721</sup> *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.370.

<sup>722</sup> *The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Cox, p.370.

<sup>723</sup> Rutland, p.326.

Perhaps the reason why *The Dynasts* succeeds where it might have failed is that, beneath its chaotic surface, patterns can be discerned. As Southerington observes and Taylor explains, *The Dynasts* is made up of 'three basic forms, the natural speech rhythms and dialect of everyday people, the blank verse and stately idiom used most commonly for parliamentary debate and military councils, and the rhyming stanzas spoken mainly by the Spirits'.<sup>724</sup>

Thus, there is a hierarchy of languages, matching the hierarchy of consciousness. As 'voices' become more knowing and self-conscious, they become more formal and metrical.<sup>725</sup>

In consequence, the Spirits, which Hardy elsewhere described as a kind of quintessential or 'best human intelligence of their time', use poetry, where the people use prose.<sup>726</sup> Yet even the Spirits do not know, cannot anticipate, and can do nothing to affect the 'urging force' of the silent, speechless Immanent Will: consciousness, like language, has its limits.<sup>727</sup>

## Conclusion

Hardy's poetry was written, he maintained, to set out the 'philosophy of life' he 'afterwards developed in *The Dynasts*', and this is, in itself, sufficient reason enough to

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<sup>724</sup> Southerington, p.179; Taylor, *Hardy's Metres*, p.170.

<sup>725</sup> Taylor, *Hardy's Metres*, p.170.

<sup>726</sup> Letter of 22 March, 1904, in *CL3*, p.117.

<sup>727</sup> Letter of 2 June, 1907, in *CL3*, p.255.

analyze this most unusual of creative fictions (LW, p.325). In fact, *The Dynasts* stands in its own right as perhaps the most eco-critically relevant and revealing of his poetic works. Building on the contrasts and contradictions that were already apparent in the poetry, *The Dynasts* combines natural and supernatural worlds within a dramatic framework that blends prose and poetry and tests the limits of realism as a mode of expression. It exploits (to enormous effect) Hardy's extraordinary ability to combine aerial perspective with fine detail, swooping down from a long view of Europe in turmoil to consider and capture the fate of snail and worm; and in so doing, Hardy once again blurs the boundary between human and non-human worlds, reasserting the equivalence of all living things. But Hardy's most remarkable achievement lies not in the series of contrasts or contradictions that animate this extraordinary work. It lies in the idea that binds it together: that of the Immanent Will.

It is possible, of course, to read into the sightless workings of the Immanent Will further proof that humankind is bound to destroy itself, and perhaps the planet with it. But as Hardy also suggests, we are not necessarily bound to follow predetermined patterns of self-destructive behaviour. In conclusion, therefore, it remains to be considered what options are realistically available to us if we do have a degree of free-will, as Hardy maintained, and might in our lifetimes develop the kind of collective consciousness towards which Hardy so hopefully (and perhaps unexpectedly) gestures in the closing pages of *The Dynasts*.

One suggestion might be simply summarised as: retreat. It is, of course, a coincidence – albeit a striking one – that, in characterising humankind's predicament, Lovelock (2006) refers back to the same events that Hardy describes in *The Dynasts*:



'in certain ways', he remarks, 'the human world is re-enacting the tragedy of Napoleon's advance on Moscow in 1812'.<sup>728</sup> At the very moment Napoleon drew near to the Russian capital, Lovelock remarks, and with winter fast advancing, his defeat became inevitable. Perhaps ours is a similarly unsustainable triumph, made only temporarily possible by technology. If so, the question then becomes: is there still time for a retreat rather than a rout?

If modernity is necessarily post-natural, and if, for that matter, alienation is the price we pay for control of nature, we should, perhaps, consider abandoning any attempt to reunite or reconnect ourselves with the natural world. Given the limitations that seem inherent in the human condition, it might be better to accept that humankind is destined to imperil the environment, and instead conceive of a future in which Beck's 'risk society' is taken to its ultimate and logical conclusion: one where humankind seals itself into artificial eco-systems that minimize all contact with the non-human world.<sup>729</sup> According to this line of reasoning, the answer is to sever humankind's connection to the environment (that is, the non-human world with which we interact).<sup>730</sup>

But as E. O. Wilson remarks, 'only in the last moment of human history has the delusion arisen that people can flourish apart from the rest of the living world'.<sup>731</sup> This 'philosophy of exemptionalism' is doomed not (or not simply) because the creation of a 'prosthetic environment' (currently) lies beyond our technological grasp; it is doomed because the imprint of our long evolution cannot be 'erased in a few generations of

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<sup>728</sup> Lovelock, *Revenge*, p.149.

<sup>729</sup> These ideas were discussed in Graham Huggan's lecture 'After Nature' at the Roehampton University conference on 'Postcolonality and Ecology' on 14 November 2008.

<sup>730</sup> My definition is taken from I. G. Simmons, *An Environmental History of Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.6.

<sup>731</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p.333.

urban existence'.<sup>732</sup> Dawkins may have famously announced that 'we are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes', but we are also shaped by what Wilson calls an innate biophilia, 'the connections which we subconsciously seek with the rest of life'.<sup>733</sup> As he concludes, 'for human survival and mental health and fulfilment, we need the natural setting in which the human mind almost certainly evolved and in which culture has developed over these million years of evolution.'<sup>734</sup>

Biophilia may indeed seem a very slight and fragile defence against environmental difficulties now so deep-rooted and widespread, or, indeed, against competing instincts that have thus far shaped only a blind and selfish pursuit of our needs, a pursuit that has pushed the planet to the brink of another great 'extinction spasm' (this one 'grace of mankind').<sup>735</sup> But if at its 'deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth', as sociobiologist and eco-psychologist suggest, biophilia might yet represent a chance for species survival, no matter how slim: as Naess remarks, if our sense of self 'is expanded to include the natural world, behaviour leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self-destruction.'<sup>736</sup> Thus, we reconnect with the enlightened self-interest to which Naess elsewhere refers.

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<sup>732</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p.333.

<sup>733</sup> Preface to the 1st edn (1976), in Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.xxi. Whilst Dawkins' view remains prevalent, recent developments in the field of evolutionary biology suggest that 'it leaves us blind to crucial evolutionary processes at higher scales – among groups, species and even whole ecosystems'; the idea of species selection has already gained ground, but there is now discussion about the (faint) possibility of group selection (which might 'favour the interests of a group over any of its constituent individuals') or even of ecosystem selection (which 'might act to shape an entire ecosystem over the interest of its constituent species'); Bob Holmes, 'The Not-So Selfish Gene', *New Scientist*, 7 March, 2009, p.36, p.39. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p.334.

<sup>734</sup> Wilson, 'Arousing Biophilia'.

<sup>735</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p.327.

<sup>736</sup> Rozak, p.5, and quoted by Rozak, p.12, in *Ecopsychology*, ed. by Rozak.

We also return to Thomas Hardy, whose verse is a reminder of a time of transition where a deep and intimate understanding of the natural world, and our history within it, was still a birthright. 'His father's enjoyment of nature was matched by his mother's extraordinary store of local legend and story', Gittings remarks; together 'they filled Hardy's world with landscape and human dealing, the special blend that was to mark his poems and novels'.<sup>737</sup> It is to that landscape that we return in Chapter 7, which deals with Hardy's next collection of poetry, *Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses*. As we will (re)discover, Hardy's interest lies with what he had already, in *Poems of the Past and Present*, called 'enchased and lettered' lands, and our relationship to them.<sup>738</sup> In the short-hand of eco-criticism, it lies with 'dwelling': the idea that we too might find some way to live on earth in a responsible, a sustainable way.

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<sup>737</sup> Gittings, p.37.

<sup>738</sup> 'On An Invitation to the United States', CP75, l.10.

# Chapter 7

## *Time's Laughingstocks*

### Introduction

Hardy followed *The Dynasts* with his third collection of verse. Published in 1909, *Time's Laughingstocks* (CP152-245) is notable for an overall mood that can only be described as bleak. Pinion perhaps puts it mildly: 'the general tone is sombre'.<sup>739</sup> 'Throughout', wrote one reviewer, 'the outlook is that of disillusion and despair'.<sup>740</sup> Hardy's defence is unintentionally amusing. 'Of the ninety odd poems the volume contains, more than half do not answer to the description at all', he wrote, and 'of the remainder many cannot be so characterised without exaggeration'.<sup>741</sup> If the reviewer's assertion were true, he added, 'it might be no bad antidote to the grinning optimism nowadays affected in some quarters'.<sup>742</sup> That he was nonetheless able to persuade a paying public to buy and most critics to accept, even respect a collection whose tone was, as he privately conceded, 'preponderantly tragic', is, perhaps, a strong indication that Hardy was by now an established and admired poet as well as novelist (the volume

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<sup>739</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.64.

<sup>740</sup> The review is quoted by Hardy in a letter of 13th December, 1909, in *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.306.

<sup>741</sup> *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.307.

<sup>742</sup> *Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. by Millgate, p.307.

sold so well it was reprinted less than three weeks later).<sup>743</sup> Indeed, with the death of George Meredith, he was set fair to sail a 'settled course as a Grand Old Man of English Letters'.<sup>744</sup> For Hardy, this brought a certain freedom to say what he wanted in the way that he wanted to; and, whilst hardly insensible to contemporary opinion, he was anxious to hold fast to his own interpretation of humankind's difficulties. 'Mr Hardy, whatever else he disbelieves in,' *The Athenaeum* (1910) wryly but perceptively pointed out in its review of *Time's Laughingstocks*, 'believes in the strength and permanence of truth'.<sup>745</sup>

It is, perhaps, to the eco-critic's advantage that Hardy was able to advance sometimes unsettling opinions, opinions that readers even today might find disquieting. It enables him to engage with concepts – such as 'dwelling' – in a way that is critical to an understanding of his point of view, as this Chapter sets out to explain. It has four sections. The first focuses on a single poem, 'The Revisitation' (CP152). The following sections allow a more wide-ranging discussion of the collection, which takes as its point of departure eco-critical interest in the concept of 'dwelling'.

### **'The Revisitation' as Exemplar**

The starting point for this analysis of *Time's Laughingstocks* is a detailed examination of its opening poem, 'The Revisitation'. The choice might appear surprising, since 'The Revisitation' is not a poem that is in any obvious sense 'about'

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<sup>743</sup> Letter of 29 December, 1909, in *CL4*, p.67, Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.206.

<sup>744</sup> Gittings, p.545.

<sup>745</sup> Quoted in *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed. by Gibson and Johnson, p.58.

nature or the natural world. Its subject is love, a very human emotion, and it is best known because it seems to anticipate the great 'love journey poems' of 1912-13 in which Hardy responded to the death of his first wife.<sup>746</sup> In fact, and as I hope to demonstrate, 'The Revisitation' *does* reflect on our relationship with the natural world, and in ways that are characteristic of the collection as a whole.

Long haunted by his 'bitterest loss' (l.6), the poem's narrator retraces his footsteps up over hill and heath to the place where he used to meet a lover. The scenery is full of reminders of that time. As darkness falls, he sees a familiar silhouette retracing *her* footsteps just as he has retraced his. It is none other than his former sweetheart. Amidst the shadows, they revive and relive the past, talking happily until dawn, as though time meant nothing, and they had never been apart. By the (harsh) light of day, however, the narrator discovers that time has worn away at her as it has worn away at him, and he makes his all too obvious excuses, and leaves, going back to town.

Clearly, one can argue that this is neither nature-writing nor writing in which nature is central. Nature is measured against, and meaningful only because of, the narrator's past love and his present, poetic reverie, through which it is seen. Thus, the 'dolesome [sic] exclamations' (l.49) of the peewits are mentioned because they seem to be 'the voicings of the self-same throats I had heard when life was green' (l.50). The natural world is incidental, a kind of mood music to the narrator's musings as he walks a well-worn path back into his past. Yet the natural world is also a persistent, an insistent part of the fabric of the poem, into which it is so well knitted it comes as something of a

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<sup>746</sup> Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*, p.21.

surprise to discover that many if not most stanza contain some direct reference to it. In the nature of this as journey poem, furthermore, the narrator's story is accompanied – shadowed – by the landscape through which he travels. The movement of the poem from darkness into light, dusk through to dawn, also dictates the narrative outcome. In effect it insists on an inescapable dependency: we cannot make day into night, even if we have learnt to make night into day (see, below, my point about cultural pollution). Despite its apparent passivity, then, it is ultimately the natural world that disturbs the narrative's momentary equilibrium, its moment of 'mutual forgiveness' (l.90).

In fact, an eco-critical approach suggests several other ways in which the poem can be read as a commentary on our relationship with our environment, not just our relationships with each other. Firstly, this is a poem that reveals a strong feeling for and familiarity with place, where place is a non-human presence. Secondly, it bears several of the hallmarks of the pastoral genre. Thirdly, and perhaps confusingly, it can also be read as a piece of wilderness writing. Finally, and by way of complete contrast, the narrator's disenchantment with and disengagement from his some-time lover can also be read as a symbolic commentary on humankind's disenchantment with the natural world – or, from an eco-feminist perspective, a patriarchal society's treatment of it.

The analysis that follows develops each of these points in turn, starting with the narrator's striking familiarity with place. From 'ridge of Waterstone' (l.14) to 'the grey, gaunt, lonely Lane of Slyre' (l.30), from 'the Milton Woods to Dole-Hill' (l.101), the poem testifies to the narrator's strong sense of and familiarity with place. Despite the years, this is a landscape whose names he has not forgotten, whose contours he still recalls.

Behind this strong sense of the structure and shape of the land, there is a naturalist's eye for the detail of a living world. It may be that the landscape matters only because of its associations with his past, but it matters nonetheless, and the narrator's descriptions betray the fact with their precision. He has not lost his eye for 'thyme and chamomiles' (l.40), a reference that calls to mind Hardy's description of his father, 'lying on a bank of thyme or camomile [sic] with the grasshoppers leaping over him' (*LW*, p.26), entirely at ease with the natural world. Furthermore, the poem is notable for the way in which it evokes as well as it describes the natural world.

Maybe flustered by my presence

Rose the pewits, just as all those years back, wailing soft and loud,

And revealing their pale pinions like a fitful phosphorescence

Up against the cope of cloud,

(ll.45-48)

In powerful passages of imagistic writing such as this, the poem evokes the beauty of a remembered love affair. It also (even if inadvertently) captures the beauty of the open spaces through which the narrative journeys. There is a strong sense of sensuous immediacy here; at the very least, it suggests a striking receptivity to the natural world. From an eco-critical perspective, however, the impact of the narrative lies in the fact that this moment will not be repeated; that, as he returns to his self-imposed exile, a narrator who used to notice such things will not notice them again. Indeed, it was in



similar terms that Hardy later reflected on his own life, in a poem called 'Afterwards' (CP511):

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,  
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,  
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,  
'He was a man who used to notice such things'?

(ll.1-4)<sup>747</sup>

In 'The Revisitation', this sense of loss, of lost contact, becomes part of the poem's pastoral. As I explained in Chapter 3, pastoral may be defined in both spatial and temporal terms, as a contrast between town and country, or an elegiac tension between past and present.<sup>748</sup> The poem combines both. The narrator's journey carries him through space and time: back to his 'primal purple years' (l.4), and back to the 'trails the ewes had beat' (l.104), where startled birds call out 'just as all those years back' (l.46). The pastoral dimension is further underlined by the contrast between the stylized and self-conscious language of the poem, apparent in, for example, its insistent alliteration ('grey, gaunt', 'primal purple', 'pale pinions like a fitful phosphorescence'), and the unself-conscious naturalness of the world it describes. Garrard refers to this in the context of classical pastoral as its 'civilized poetic artifice', and, given the common root of 'civilized' and 'civic', one might also wonder if the artifice of the narrator's language reflects the artificiality of his urban (and urbane) existence, where the 'friendly

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<sup>747</sup> 'Afterwards' was published in *Moments of Vision* (1917).

<sup>748</sup> Garrard, p.35.

shine' (l.24) of the town's lamp light draws a sharp line in the darkness, separating it from the countryside.<sup>749</sup>

For all that it adopts or adapts its conventions, however, 'The Revisitation' debunks the pastoral idyll as cruelly as it does romantic love: not for nothing, Turner argues, is the aged lover (a 'wasted figure', l.115) called 'Agnette', or 'Lamb'.<sup>750</sup> Whilst he may revisit his past, the narrator cannot return to it; he cannot in any meaningful sense go back. (Whilst this is hardly Hardy's meaning, we may in turn read the poem as a metaphor for our own separation from the environment, of our consciousness that we are separate, different.) If the narrator could but 'stay in the dark' (so to speak), all would be well, but once he becomes conscious of the impact of 'Time's transforming chisel' (l.109) the consciousness cannot be undone. With day-break comes the dawning realization that momentary (re)union is at an end; lives are again and forever rent.

Insofar as this poem looks back and travels back to the land, it is a pastoral; but the landscape it references is closer to wilderness, and the concept of wilderness is, of course, another touchstone of environmental criticism. The poem describes a 'rugged ridge' (l.14) 'steep and eery' (l.95) out on to which the narrator has not just ventured, but 'adventured' (l.34), startling pewits and conies as he goes. There can be no lingering here. For both him and her, this is a (re)visitation. Just as there is no future in his or indeed our pastoral pasts, there is no possibility of existing for more than a moment in a

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<sup>749</sup> Garrard, p.35. In modern Britain it is, of course, difficult to escape this light pollution, and it is a further, telling irony that aviators and aircrew – themselves the most artificial of creatures – instead refer to this phenomena as 'cultural lighting'.

<sup>750</sup> Turner, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.186, p.209.

wilderness environment which by definition must reject us in order to remain an authentic wilderness.

Retreat is therefore inevitable. But if the poem was in any way typical of 'wilderness' writing, the narrator would return reinvigorated by his encounter with the natural world. Instead, the journey is self-defeating. Amidst the solitude of this 'spacious landscape' (l.102), he and she have witnessed a blazing dawn 'of glory chambered mortals view not' (l.99), but it has neither restored his spirits nor resurrected their relationship. On the contrary, it has cruelly revealed her lost looks and his own shallowness, his own susceptibility to a romanticized illusion:

Well I knew my native weakness,

Well I know it still.

(ll.133-4)

But dawn also reveals the mole-hills and sheep trails (ll.103-4), and a land that whilst wild is not quite a wilderness. On the contrary, it reflects generations of human involvement. Hardy's poem might seem to depend on a clear-cut distinction between a pure, untouched, and authentic natural space, and the built environment beyond whose lamp-lit limits the narrator is 'clasped' by 'country darkness' (ll.23), but the narrator nowhere escapes the reach of humankind, whose ancient traces the landscape everywhere reveals. There is a double irony in the fact that those traces have less to do with human habitation – with dwelling – than with death:

Round about me bulged the barrows

As before, in antique silence – immemorial funeral piles –

Where the sleek herds trampled daily the remains of flint-tipt arrows

(ll.37-39)

This is a landscape of death in more than one sense. Stripped of shelter by our ancestors, it is also a scene of despoliation, of ancestral destruction. To return to an earlier point, it is 'quite clear' that traditional heathland areas were once covered by trees, but 'our great wildwoods passed away in prehistory'.<sup>751</sup> This is a wasteland rather than a wilderness, rich in (human) associations, but species-poor, an impoverished world that cannot rival even our own urban eco-systems for biological diversity.

Another, important point relates to the story told by the poem. Clearly, it belongs to the narrator, and his first-person narrative dominates and decisively shapes not only our sense of the land, but of Agnette herself. Yet the story is as much hers as his, and, like the land, she emerges as a powerful and unsettling presence in spite of the narrative's emphasis on its (male) protagonist. There is a certain correspondence between Agnette and the hills from which, to paraphrase Clements, she appears to issue.<sup>752</sup> Her true features are as much marked by time as is the land itself, which everywhere testifies to its long human history. She is a visitor to it, true, and at day-break the narrator watches 'her form descend the slopes' (l.127), back to her home 'in

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<sup>751</sup> Rackham, p.286, p.64.

<sup>752</sup> Patricia Clements, "Unlawful Beauty": Order and Things in Hardy's Poems', in *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Clements and Grindle, pp.137-154 (p.144).

the vale' (l.62); but whilst he chooses never to return (ll.137-140), it is not certain and nowhere stated that she will abandon her habit of lonely vigil up on the hill. These down-lands were her 'father's fief' (l.63), and as she tells him when they meet at dusk:

'There are few things I would rather  
Than be wandering at this spirit-hour – lone-lived, my kindred dead –  
On this wold of well-known feature I inherit from my father:  
Night or day, I have no dread....

(ll.81-84)

If, for a moment, we conceive of Agnette as an authentic child of nature, at one with the non-human world from which she has never been separated, we might see the poem in yet another light: as a reflection of Hardy's sense that humankind has seen through nature's disguises. The narrator's disenchantment is also our own, a disenchantment with a natural world that has reluctantly yielded up its secrets and through whose disguises we have come to see all too clearly. As 'the Mother' mourns in the poem of the same name, 'Reason is rank in my temples' (l.85); her finest creation has long since learnt to plumb 'the deeps of my mysteries' (l.67). Now, humankind:

'Reckons gross and ignoble my teaching,  
Immoral my story,  
My love-lights a lure, that my species  
May gather and gain.

(‘The Mother Mourns’, CP76, ll.49-52)

One might say that, in ‘The Revisitation’, the narrator’s romantic expectations have met the same fate as first our Romantic and then post-Romantic expectations. He has idealized the ‘One who went, came not again’ (l.6), and so his ‘brief romantic’ gesture (l.27) – his return to ‘once-loved ground’ (l.16) – ends in defeat. Humankind has, in turn, idealized the natural world, at every turn investing it with a significance that it cannot support. In Hardy’s lifetime, those expectations were still shaped by Romanticism; in our own by, amongst others, a species of post-Romanticism that resurfaces (perhaps unexpectedly) in the environmentalist’s sense of wilderness as a source of spiritual sustenance. But neither the narrator’s idealization of his lost love (who is the true native, having never left the land and having no need to return), nor this idealization of this ‘open drouthy downland thinly grassed’ (l.34) as some form of ‘authentic’ wilderness, can resist scrutiny. By the clear and un sentimental light of day, we too see ‘Pits, where peonies once did dwell’ (l.112). Perhaps that is a blessing, rather than a curse: just as there is a sense in which the narrator is freed from his fantasy, freed from his time-haunted past, so we too are free to look on the landscape in a cooler and more objective way.

In so doing, we may also wish to look at the poem from a broadly eco-feminist perspective, and draw another parallel: this time between the way that the (male) protagonist casually and cruelly discards his Agnette simply because she (like the landscape she inhabits) reveals the traces of ‘Time’s transforming chisel’, and the way that a patriarchal society has first plundered and then abandoned that same landscape,

now beautiful only for its desolate emptiness; 'emphatic in its admonitions', as Hardy wrote of Edgon, and 'grand in its simplicity' (*RN*, p.4). (Indeed, a modern environmental critic preoccupied with the idea of wilderness as pure and authentic might be similarly dismissive of the landscape with which Agnette is associated, a complex, compromised landscape whose desolation so obviously implicates humankind, but on which we continue to depend.) Nor can we readily overlook the cruel coincidence that links a landscape steeped in death, where 'sleek herds trampled daily the remains of flint-tipt arrows' (l.39), with the fact that Agnette's faithless lover is, of course, a soldier, a 'war-torn stranger' (l.17).

The narrator's soldiering prompts a final point. The poem's title refers most obviously to Agnette's ghostly reappearance, the sense that hers is a visitation brought forth from 'a past that lived no more' (l.54). It also carries the suggestion that he, at least, is simply a visitor to this bleak upland, for all that she has and may continue to haunt it. The moment passed, he returns to the country town whose 'friendly' lamp-light (l.23) and familiar sights he forsook the night before. But this is not his home. Indeed, he has none. His life as a soldier is one of 'wayfaring' (l.94): 'Soon I got the Route elsewither' (l.139).

The soldier's way of life is, of course, as 'ancient' as the country barrack in which the narrator finds himself billeted (l.2), but it may nonetheless (if a little incautiously) be read it against the 'growing dis-association with localities' to which Hardy repeatedly drew attention, a process of displacement that was by its very nature a 'complete reversal of the old condition of things', as he remarked in 1883.<sup>753</sup> That reading is

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<sup>753</sup> Letter to Percy Bunting dated 5 November 1883, in *SL*, p.35.

further and poignantly underlined by the fact that, as I have already pointed out, the narrator can remember the names given to every ridge, hill, and wood twenty years after his last visit. But this is not enough. Despite the poem's evocation of a land that is, like Egdon, 'slighted and enduring' (*RN*, p.5), it offers no sense of what might be meant by 'dwelling', that sustained and sustainable relationship with the environment to which environmental criticism refers. Perhaps paradoxically, this is an important reason for reading the poem eco-critically. It does not offer, rather, stubbornly refuses to provide an answer; it instead emphasizes the problem; and the problem is how to define what we might today mean by 'dwelling'.

As it may now be apparent, 'The Revisitation' resists easy classification. Complex and contrary, its narrative arc provides intriguing, if indirect insights into our changing relationship with the natural world, whilst simultaneously resisting any single or straightforward reading of it, eco-critical or otherwise. Yet at its heart, it remains a poem about 'a sleepless swain of fifty' (l.27) who has, in leaving his lover, also renounced a once intimate acquaintance with the natural world, and perhaps in consequence, committed himself to a peripatetic way of life that might be said to echo our own unsettled and increasingly 'virtualized' existence.<sup>754</sup> And in this key respect, 'The Revisitation' is important not only in itself, but because it is characteristic of the collection as a whole, as Hardy recognized in picking it as the opening poem. Indeed, even the collection's title is borrowed from the poem which, when first published in

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<sup>754</sup> 'Not only do I inhabit my virtual communities,' writes one commentator on the dispersed nature of modern existence, 'my virtual communities also inhabit my life. I've been colonized; my sense of family at the most fundamental level has been virtualized'. Howard Rheingold (1994), quoted in Andrew Murphie and John Potts, *Culture and Technology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.202.



1904, was entitled 'Time's Laughingstocks, A Summer Romance'.<sup>755</sup> In *Time's Laughingstocks* as in 'The Revisitation', the concept of dwelling – of a settled and sustainable, a situated relationship with the natural world – is at best a troubled and troubling tangent, overshadowed by love. But in both, love is also eclipsed, coldly and cruelly. As the title of the collections hints, humankind is, time and time again, mocked and humbled by time, and the eco-critical significance of *Time's Laughingstocks* ultimately derives from that deeply Hardyian and entirely unfashionable argument.

Dwelling; love; time: these are the central themes of the collection. They are, in turn, central to the discussion that follows, which extends the analysis to the collection as a whole. It has three distinct sections. The first and largest section engages with the idea of dwelling, and considers the extent to which *Time's Laughingstocks* informs our understanding of this (eco)critical concept. The second section examines the way in which love is presented in the collection, not as an idealized concept, but as an overriding instinctual force that for good or ill shapes our lives, and, perhaps, decides our impact on the environment. The third section examines further ways in which love is shown to be subject to time, before considering a possibility that Hardy himself did not: that even time cannot now erase, still less undo, humankind's impact on its environment.

## Dwelling

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<sup>755</sup> Purdy, p.138.

As I have already suggested, dwelling is an important – perhaps the most important – eco-critical concept. Arguably, the future of humankind depends on our ability to define it in an environmentally sensitive and sustainable way. 'To become dwellers in the land', Kirkpatrick Sale remarked, 'is to understand the place, the immediate, specific place, where we live'.<sup>756</sup> But this eco-critical interest in how we might again 'become dwellers in the land' has attracted criticism from, amongst others, post-colonial theorists. At a conference on 'Postcoloniality and Ecology' (November, 2008), for example, Robert Spencer rounded on eco-critics for what he considered their uncritical admiration for Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher whose later work emphasizes 'dwelling' as an 'authentic form of being'.<sup>757</sup> According to Spencer, however, this is just so much 'Black Forest prattle'. It is not simply that, as Nixon notes, global problems need global solutions rather than a parochial or a provincial and self-defeating insistence on 'dwelling', an issue I discussed in Chapter 6. The concept of dwelling is itself politically suspect because profoundly reactionary. There can be no return to an idyllic, pre-industrial state. Rustic virtues are long lost, never to be recovered, nowhere to be found; they are simply a pretext for resignation in the face of historical inevitability. Worse, this passion for rootedness is by its very nature exclusive, not inclusive, a point that Nixon also underlines. In contrast to the post-colonialist concern for 'the cosmopolitan and the transnational', Nixon remarks, eco-critics

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<sup>756</sup> *The Green Reader*, ed. by Dobson, p.77.

<sup>757</sup> Robert Spencer's lecture on 'Imperialism and the Domination of Nature: Postcolonial Ecocriticism's Dialectical Antecedents' was delivered at the Roehampton University conference on 'Postcoloniality and Ecology' on 14 November 2008. Focusing on the work of Jonathan Bate, and in particular *Song of the Earth*, Spencer explicitly rejected what he perceived as a dominant eco-critical emphasis on Heidegger.

prioritize 'the literature of place', which is a form of 'isolationist thinking' that is by definition 'exclusionary' and must therefore lead to 'ecoparochialism'.<sup>758</sup>

In fact, eco-critics have already drawn attention to the very issues that Spencer and Nixon identify; see, for example, Garrard's article on 'Heidegger, Heaney, and the problem of dwelling', and Bate's article on 'Poetry and Biodiversity', both published in 1998.<sup>759</sup> For the eco-critic, the more insidious problem is that the concept of 'dwelling' is seen as interchangeable with the idea of the organic community, a concept that is neither new, nor politically neutral. Burke made the idea of an 'organic England' an evolutionary antidote to revolution, and a byword for conservatism.<sup>760</sup> Leavis in turn made it a touchstone for his critique of modern British society: 'what we have lost', he wrote in *Culture and Environment* (1933), 'is the organic community with the living culture it embodied'.<sup>761</sup> For this thesis, the related difficulty is that, if the concept of 'dwelling' appears to be innately reactionary, so may Hardy's representation of it.

As we have seen, Hardy's reputation was undeniably affected by his association with a way of life whose passing his oeuvre seems to elegize. Ironically, Leavis was pre-eminent amongst the critics who drew attention to the connection. The generally

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<sup>758</sup> Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in *Postcolonial Studies*, p.235, p.247, p.237, p.238. This hostility towards 'dwelling' and 'rootedness' reflects a more general resistance towards what Heise calls 'essentialist' concepts of identity (p.5).

<sup>759</sup> See *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, pp.167-181 and pp.53-70.

<sup>760</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.216.

<sup>761</sup> F. R. Leavis & Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933, repr. 1942), p.1. As others have remarked, and I noted in Chapter 1, Leavis' association with a concept that appears synonymous with the eco-critical emphasis on 'dwelling' may in part explain why eco-criticism has found it difficult to establish itself in British (as opposed to American) academic circles. Leavis has fallen very far from favour, perhaps overshadowing any sensible discussion of the concept. For eco-criticism, the difficulty is compounded by a continuing academic preoccupation with the Modernist writers that (somewhat ironically) Leavis played so important a part in establishing, writers for whom city life presented the real, the quintessentially 'modern' challenge.

rural setting of Hardy's poetry was, he wrote, 'a point of critical significance'.<sup>762</sup> Furthermore, and as I discussed at length in Chapter 3, critical responses to Hardy have sometimes been shaped by the sense that his work – that 'Wessex' – presents a pastoral, but pastoral in the pejorative sense of a wilfully misleading and idealised impression of country life constructed to appeal to a middle-class audience. It hardly helps that this is the same kind of audience over which it continues to exert a fascination today. Nor is *Time's Laughingstocks* immune to this kind of criticism. Whereas Hardy's previous verse collections, such as *Wessex Poems*, were heavily weighted towards what Gittings calls 'philosophical, sceptical, and quasi-religious poetry', *Time's Laughingstocks* focuses on country life.<sup>763</sup> That focus is further emphasized by Hardy's choice of form. A number of poems are based on folk-forms such as the ballad, amongst them 'The Dark-Eyed Gentlemen' (CP201), 'The Orphaned Old Maid' (CP203), 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy', and 'Julie-Jane' (CP205), whilst Gittings detects 'ballad-like lines' in 'The Rash Bride' and a 'folk-song echo' in 'Bereft'.<sup>764</sup> Hardy also includes the occasional dialect poem, for example, 'The Homecoming' (CP210).

Moreover, most of the poems are set in the countryside – the collection's centrepiece is 'A Set of Country Songs' – and several, amongst them 'A Trampwoman's

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<sup>762</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings*, p.49.

<sup>763</sup> Gittings, p.542.

<sup>764</sup> Gittings, p.543, p.544. The relationships are not necessarily exact. For example, 'The Orphaned Old Maid' has four-line stanzas typical of the ballad, but takes a Common Song measure, whilst 'The Dark-Eyed Gentleman' consists of septets, rather than simple quatrains, and its metre is structured around tetrameters (4 feet) interrupted (in the fourth and fifth lines) by dimeters (2 feet), rather than the usual lilting alternation of (iambic) tetrameters and trimeters (3 feet). Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny the sing-song quality of the two poems. See, in particular, the Metrical Appendix, in Taylor, *Hardy's Metres*.

Tragedy', are 'structured by a very exact local geography'.<sup>765</sup> Furthermore, many reference Wessex, and a few do so directly, reworking or developing stories from the novels. Mellstock is, for example, mentioned in several poems (e.g. CP211, CP212, CP216), and the Mellstock quire plays a central role in 'The Dead Quire' (CP213), a poem that abounds with delicate, lovely touches:

'Then did the Quick pursue the Dead  
By crystal Froom that crinkles there;  
And still the viewless quire ahead  
Voiced the old holy air.

(ll.73-76)

This is a touching, charming piece of whimsy, firmly rooted in the fictional world of Wessex with which it shares characters.<sup>766</sup> It also links back, very directly, to poems such as 'Friends Beyond', in *Wessex Poems*, which itself shares an origin in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, one of Hardy's more light-hearted and purely 'pastoral' novels (he himself called it an 'idyll', *LW*, p.88). And, like all good pastorals, it is nostalgic in tone: as the poem's title suggests, the days of the Mellstock quire are long past, and all but lost in 'the Mead of Memories' (l.1). 'The House of Hospitalities' (CP156) is a similarly nostalgic glance back to a spirit of cheerful community that now lives on only in the narrator's memory.

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<sup>765</sup> *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Widdowson, p.302.

<sup>766</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.122.

Clearly, the collection does include idealised depictions of a way of life 'where the maypole was yearly planted' ('One We Knew', CP227, l.9). Perhaps these were the kinds of tale to which readers responded to most readily. If so, however, Hardy was not deterred from including the kind of detail that keeps nostalgia in check:

She said she often heard the gibbet creaking

As it swayed in the lightning flash,

('One We Knew', ll.21-22)

Indeed, the tone of most of the poems in the collection is gritty and direct, and they depict a way of life that is much less than bucolic.

It is, perhaps, germane to note that, the year before *Time's Laughingstocks* was published, Hardy edited the *Select Poems of William Barnes*, whose 'pastorals' (as Hardy called them) provide an interesting contrast with his own work.<sup>767</sup> As I noted in Chapter 5, Hardy admired Barnes, but distanced himself from the older poet's approach. In his Preface to the work, he remarks that 'as by the screen of dialect, so by the intense localization aforesaid, much is lost to the outsider who by looking into Barnes's pages only revives general recollections of country life.'<sup>768</sup> And whilst *Time's Laughingstocks* does feature poems from 'Down Wessex way', as 'The Spring Call' (CP204) begins (l.1), the point of this poem is that, whilst local accents might vary, the message remains the same. The same might be said of Hardy's collection as a whole:

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<sup>767</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.76.

<sup>768</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.82.

notwithstanding their local inflection, these are stories about the broader question of what it is to be human.

For Hardy, the more serious objection to Barnes' poetry may have been that, as he remarked in an earlier review (1879) of the older man's poems, his 'rustics are, as a rule, happy people, and very seldom feel the painful sting of the rest of modern mankind, the disproportioning between the desire for serenity and the power of obtaining it'.<sup>769</sup> 'Repose and content mark nearly all of Barnes's verse', Hardy later remarked (1918).<sup>770</sup> It was not his way, and a closer look at *Time's Laughingstocks* shows how Hardy often invoked only to undermine the pastoral.

In 'The Two Rosalinds' (CP154), for example, Hardy refers to one of the most powerful of pastoral settings, the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. It is, as Gifford remarks, 'Shakespeare's English Arcadia', and for Hardy's narrator, it too is 'Nature's wildwood garden' (l.19), a place with 'running brooks for books' (l.19) whose lucky inhabitants can call 'idleness their trade' (l.20).<sup>771</sup> But this is not the real subject of the poem. It relates, instead, a middle-aged man's memory of a youthful infatuation with an actress, a memory called up by the one word 'Rosalind' glimpsed on a playbill by the side of a busy city street. Arden can hardly survive so pointed a contrast: its whimsical irrelevance is exposed by the din of 'stern utilitarian traffic' (l.14), the unreality of its pastoral vision by 'city movement, murk, and grime' (l.10). Still, Shakespeare's playful pastoral exerts a lingering influence over the narrator; the poster stirs 'an ember' (l.21); and whilst age has withered the actress whose Rosalind once entranced him, her voice

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<sup>769</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.98.

<sup>770</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Orel, p.84.

<sup>771</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.84.

is 'yet the old one', 'clear as noon' (l.49, l.50). Perhaps the poem suggests that we have lived many years in the shadow of the natural world, and cannot escape the deep feeling we still have for it. It might just as equally be taken to prove that pastoral constructions of the natural world continue to exert a profound influence on our perception of it.

The poem is not, in any case, an isolated example of Hardy's tendency to challenge and subvert the pastoral. In 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' (CP155), for example, a shepherd plays a pivotal but deeply ironic role in the poem's outcome: with his 'white smock and gleaming crook' (l.47) – details that amplify our sense of the shepherd's Christian associations – it is he who supplies the fatal herb that, intended to induce a miscarriage, inadvertently kills the hapless girl who has 'loved too well' (l.13). It is, furthermore, an important if obvious point that, whilst the pastoral tends to assume a perpetual state of sunlit splendour, Hardy tends to offer the opposite of it. 'If seasons all were summers', declares the narrator of 'The Farm-Woman's Winter' (CP162, l.1):

Then one I used to see here  
Would warm my wasted heart!

(ll.7-8)

But self-evidently the seasons are not, and many of the poems in *Time's Laughingstocks* prefer the bleak detail of a 'black winter morning' ('Bereft', CP157, l.1) to summer or, for that matter, spring: for 'Springtime deceives', as the elderly narrator of 'Autumn in King's Hintock Park' remarks (CP163, l.4).



Nor is Hardy's weather warm and winsome. There are 'rain-riddling shafts' ('A Wet Night', CP229, l.1), 'pricking rain' ('She Hears the Storm', CP228, l.6), and 'blasts that besom the green' ('The Division', CP169, l.2); indeed, 'The Wet Night' is a pointed reminder that once 'night and storm were foes indeed to fear' (CP229, l.10). For those who tramp long miles across the countryside, however, a strong sun may be just as unwelcome ('A Trampwoman's Tragedy', CP153).

Thus, Hardy's verse signals his disengagement from any uncomplicated or idyllic version of the pastoral. It is important to note, however, that Hardy's representation is no less independent of Romantic interpretations of the natural world. In particular, Hardy rejects the Romantic emphasis on a deep emotional connection with wild and untamed landscapes. As we have seen, he represents 'wilderness' not as the most potent and pure expression of nature at its grandest and most sublime, but as a compromised landscape that tells a long history of human involvement. The heath of 'The Revisitation' reappears in 'The Roman Road' (CP218) and 'By the Barrows' (CP216), where the 'outlook, lone and bare,'

The towering hawk and passing raven share,

(ll.6-8)

In both poems, however, the heath is simply the background to very human narratives.

This is not to argue any straightforward rejection of Hardy's Romantic inheritance. This was a writer who (to repeat an earlier observation) thought Shelley 'our most marvellous [sic] lyricist' (*LW*, p.22), was entirely susceptible to the appeal of the

'romantically wicked' Lord Byron (*LW*, p.216), considered Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' an excellent cure 'for despair' (*LW*, p.59), said of Keat's early death that 'no mind could conjecture what had been lost to English literature' (*LW*, p.195), and maintained that 'Romanticism will exist in human nature as long as human nature itself exists' (*LW*, p.151). But, Hardy added, 'the point is (in imaginative literature) to adopt that form of romanticism which is the mood of the age' (*LW*, p.151). For Hardy, that mood was unequivocally somber. So, in 'The Rambler' (CP221), the poem's real focus is a lovelorn narrator whose loss translates into a determined refusal to take any notice of the natural world. Yet the details that the rambler insists on ignoring are nonetheless captured with an ironic exactitude that reminds the reader of Hardy's eye for such things. Nor is this simply nature writing, as his beautifully appropriate metaphor of 'constellated daisies' serves to demonstrate (l.4).

I do not see the hills around,  
Nor mark the tints the copses wear;  
I do not note the grassy ground  
And constellated daisies there.

(ll.1-4)

It is possible that Hardy's image has its origin in Wordsworth's 'To the Daisy', or Shelley's 'The Question', which itself describes daisies as 'the constellated flower that never sets'.<sup>772</sup> It may also be that Hardy intended his borrowed reference as a pointed

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<sup>772</sup> Quoted in Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.82.

comment on the Wordsworthian belief that nature might harbour some providential plan.

As the poem continues:

Some say each songster, tree, and mead –

All eloquent of live divine –

Receives their constant careful heed:

Such keen appraisement is not mine.

(ll.9-12)

For the rambler, the 'aspects, meanings, shapes' (l.14) he sees are just his own memories of those 'missed when near/ And now perceived too late by me' (ll.15-16); for the reader, it is a poem that exists in sharp contradistinction with Wordsworth's views. Hardy finds no consolation in the landscape.

It is also noteworthy that Hardy shrinks from the kind of striking self-assertion that places the Romantic poet at the centre of his own narrative. Whilst the collection contains a handful of purely personal poems in which Hardy recounts stories of his family ('A Church Romance', CP211, 'One We Knew', CP227), marks their passing ('After the Last Breath', CP223), or memorializes his own early life ('The House of Hospitalities'), these are distinctly low-key.<sup>773</sup> By contrast, his self-effacement is on occasions surprising. In 'The Dead Man Walking' (CP166), for example, he presents himself as 'but a shape' (l.5):

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<sup>773</sup> See *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Widdowson, p.303.

A pale past picture, screening

Ashes gone cold.

(ll.7-8)

We have encountered this kind of spectral persona in poems such as 'A Christmas Ghost-Story' (CP59; see Chapter 5). That sense of self as a ghostly, a 'wraithlike' presence is, as Keith remarks, 'a notably unWordsworthian position'.<sup>774</sup> It also suggests that Hardy's continuing insistence that his verse is 'in large degree dramatic or personative' (as he put it in the 'Preface' to *Wessex Poems*) is not (or not only) a form of false modesty or another aspect of his desire to protect his own privacy, but a conscious form of disengagement from Romantic self-assertion.

Hardy's relationship to Romanticism raises another, more substantial difficulty in my discussion. If Hardy neither presents an argument for going back to the land, nor back to nature, in what sense does *Time's Laughingstocks* evoke that informed and sensitive relationship with the natural world which we might describe as 'dwelling'?

The more closely and carefully we examine the collection, the more apparent the difficulty becomes. There is a good deal of country life, but very little countryside: the way of life to which Hardy's poems refer may or may not be characterised by an abiding and deep familiarity with the non-human, the non-built world, but that world is almost entirely invisible. This contrast is most apparent in 'A Set of Country Songs', whose subject is country life, but not its relationship to the land: indeed, most of these country

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<sup>774</sup> Keith, *The Poetry of Nature*, p.102.

songs are about love (CP197, 202) or the (often unwelcome) effect or aftermath of it (CP194, 195, 196, 198, 199, 201, 203, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210).

For all its particularity of place, then, Hardy's 'place-enthusiasms' (l.2) are rarely apparent: indeed, the phrase appears, not in a poem about some part of Wessex, but in 'Aberdeen' (CP242), a poem that quietly celebrates the city whose university had given Hardy an honorary degree in 1905. Although rarely absent from the poems in this collection, Wessex is not an active presence, as it was in (say) *Return of the Native* or *The Woodlanders*. This much is obvious from 'The Pine Planters' (CP225), which draws directly on *The Woodlanders*, but borrows only Marty South's tale of heart-break, as she works on alongside Giles:

Glad to be nigh to him

Though hope is gone?

(ll.27-28)

It is her own feelings she projects onto the tree she helps plant.

In this bleak spot,

It still will grieve here

Throughout its time,

Unable to leave here,

Or change its clime;

(ll.60-64)

Here as elsewhere in the collection, a living, non-human world is presented as background, not foreground; its presence is incidental or coincidental. There is little room for nature or 'Nature's family', as Hardy referred to it in a poem from his previous verse collection ('The Lost Pyx', CP140, l.60). Moreover, the poetry is characterized by the notable and the near complete absence of Hardy's concept of the 'Immanent Will', his radical embodiment of the interconnectedness of all life. Instead, there is a distinctively modern sense of dislocation and displacement at which earlier poems (like 'The Darkling Thrush') had already hinted.

For the non-human world, that sense of disjointedness may prove disastrous, as 'Wagtail and Baby' (CP241) suggests.

A baby watched a ford, whereto  
A wagtail came for drinking;  
A blaring bull went wading through,  
The wagtail showed no shrinking.

(ll.1-4)

Stallion and mongrel similarly pass by, but still the wagtail holds its ground, unthreatened, unconcerned. Then a human comes upon the scene:

A perfect gentleman then neared;  
The wagtail, in a winking,

With terror rose and disappeared;

The baby fell a-thinking.

(ll.13-16)

This could be a sly dig at social privilege, and the mores of the well-to-do, but it could equally be an innocent child's first lesson in the kind of values that society instils in us, and, as Pinion suggests, a 'Rousseauistic criticism of modern civilisation'.<sup>775</sup>

Modern life – modern values, modern sensibilities, and modern reason – may therefore be the issue. Confronted by a universe from which science has stripped any sense of the divine – a blank, indifferent, and empty universe, lacking any kind of teleology – there is no reason to take any notice of nature, nor any reason to think that nature takes any notice of us. As Beach remarks of Hardy's concept of nature, 'conscious design, providence, harmony, benevolence have all evaporated'.<sup>776</sup> In *Time's Laughingstocks*, that feeling manifests itself in a series of poems that describe the breakdown of any sense that we share a connection (or a reciprocal relationship) with the natural world.

Nature, notes Hardy, takes no notice of us. In 'The End of the Episode' (CP178), the narrator asks:

The flowers and thymy air,

Will they now miss our coming?

The dumbles thin their humming

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<sup>775</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.88

<sup>776</sup> Beach, p.521.

To find we haunt not there?

(ll.9-12)

But the question is rhetorical: the answer, obvious. 'The Sun on the Letter' (CP183) burns:

As brightly on the page of proof

That she had shown her false to me

As if it had shown her true –

(ll.8-10)

And as the elderly narrator of 'Autumn in King's Hintock Park' (CP163) remarks:

New leaves will dance on high –

Earth never grieves! –

(ll.21-2)

There is a related point. If the natural world has nothing to say us – if we can establish no meaningful dialogue with it – we can interpret it howsoever we wish. We can impose our own, multiple, and sometimes contradictory meanings on the environment. In 'The Voice of the Thorn' (CP186), for example, the thorn bush 'speaks' whatever truth we wish to hear from it. It says one thing to 'the mid-aged and old' (l.3)



in mid-winter, another to wayfarers on 'a hot summer day' (l.10), and a third thing to the heart-broken narrator, regardless of the season or time of day. To him, it simply says:

'Here once was nigh broken  
A heart, and by thee.'

(ll.23-4)

We may still take pleasure in the natural world, of course, and do so even in the absence of the kind of metaphysical meaning whose loss Hardy rued. The first stanza of 'Let Me Enjoy' (CP193), a poem placed with perhaps deliberate calculation at the start of 'A Set of Country Songs', is a famous and touching statement of that point of view.

Let me enjoy the earth no less  
Because the all-enacting Might  
That fashioned forth its loveliness  
Had other aims than my delight.

(ll.1-4)

It is notable, however, that the poem does not develop the argument. It offers no reason for valuing the natural world other than its loveliness. It offers no hint of the "web Enorm" (After Scene, 3, CPW5, p.252) that provides *The Dynasts* with its coherency, its sense of extended community. And the collection also contains a poem

that argues the opposite point of view: that a feeling for nature may be something to resent, reject. 'The Reminder' (CP220) opposes both 'Let Me Enjoy' and the series of poems in *Poems of the Past and Present* that emphasize (and empathize with) aspects of the non-human world. Where, in 'Winter in Durnover Field' or 'Birds at Winter Nightfall', Hardy's narrator enters into and sympathises with the plight of hungry creatures struggling to find food in the depths of winter, the narrator of 'The Reminder' resents being confronted by their predicament:

Why, O starving birds, when I  
One day's joy would justify,  
And put misery out of view,  
Do you make me notice you!

(ll.9-12)

The reader may protest that behind this momentary flash of resentment lies real feeling for the hardships that birds suffer – prompted as it is by the sight of a thrush 'constrained to very/ Dregs of food by sharp distress' (ll.6-7) – but its expression is very different. To paraphrase Matthew Arnold, the dialogue of the mind with itself has already begun.

Intriguingly, one of Hardy's more unusual poems, 'Before Life and After' (CP230), in fact posits a time before consciousness:

A time there was – as one may guess

And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell –

Before the birth of consciousness,

When all went well.

None suffered sickness, love, or loss,

None knew regret, starved hope, or heartburnings;

None cared whatever crash or cross

Brought wrack to things.

(ll.1-8)

In this world before heart-ache – before 'the disease of feeling germed' (l.13) – 'primal rightness' had yet to take on 'the tinct of wrong' (l.14). And consciousness itself, rather than any narrow definition of 'modern' civilisation and its ailments, may explain the sense of separation that divides us from other living things. 'Wagtail and Baby', for example, seems to suggest that society has taught us to disdain the world from which consciousness apparently separates and elevates us. The irony is that our sense of superiority manifests itself in a reflexive cruelty towards nature, a cruelty whose pointlessness is nowhere found in the natural world, even though governed by a Darwinian struggle for survival.

There is, however, a second reason to focus on 'Before Life and After'. As I have pointed out, *Time's Laughingstocks* offers the disconcerting experience of reading a collection that is set in the countryside but involves it barely at all: at best, it is an assumed presence. This poem's glance back to a time before consciousness opens up

another, intriguing explanation for this apparent absence. If consciousness is a kind of curse, then perhaps 'to dwell' is to live a life so deeply immersed in the seasons and rhythms of the natural world that one is simply unaware of them; it is to live entirely untroubled by the scourge of Enlightenment reason, by the crisis that consciousness brings.

Thus, the natural world is absent from *Time's Laughingstocks's* depiction of rural life only insofar as those who live a life rooted in the land are necessarily oblivious to it. What they possess – and lose in leaving the land – is an inherited sense of the land as a meaningful presence in their lives. As Hardy pointed out in 1902, 'changes at which we must all rejoice have brought other changes which are not so attractive':

The labourers have become more and more migratory – the younger families in especial, who enjoy nothing so much as fresh scenery and new acquaintance. The consequences are curious and unexpected. For one thing, village tradition – a vast mass of unwritten folk-lore, local chronicle, local topography, and nomenclature – is absolutely sinking, has nearly sunk, into eternal oblivion. I cannot recall a single instance of a labourer who still lives on the farm where he was born, and I can only recall a few who have been five years on their present farms. Thus you see, there being no continuity of environment in their lives, there is no continuity of information, the names, stories, and relics of one place being speedily forgotten under the incoming facts of the next. (*LW*, p.336)

What was lost, Hardy remarked, were histories, ballads, ghost tales, names of rivers and streams, 'questions on local fairies', and the location of those 'nooks wherein wild herbs grew for the cure of divers maladies' (*LW*, p.336). This, surely, is the substance of what we might mean by 'dwelling': a continuing engagement with the natural world, a relationship which, though never fixed, remains active and alive.

The corollary is that we value the land only insofar as we are associated with it, and our own stories woven into it. This is the key to short but moving and intimate poems like 'The Roman Road' (CP218). The narrator describes the Roman Road across the heath, and the way that 'thoughtful men':

Contrast its days of Now and Then,

(ll.3-4)

For him, however, its meaning lies not with visions of Roman legions proudly pacing it, but with his memories of his mother,

Guiding my infant steps, as when

We walked that ancient thoroughfare,

The Roman Road.

(ll.13-15)

As Pinion notes, the poem recalls an observation in *The Life*, apropos of Boldini and Hobbema – 'that of infusing emotion into the baldest external objects either by the

presence of a human figure among them, or by mark of some human connection with them' (LW, p.124).<sup>777</sup>

This sense of a continuing engagement with our environment does, therefore, surface in the collection. That it does so infrequently may simply reflect the way of life that Hardy is recalling, revisiting: his characters know not what they know. There is, however, another and perhaps more plausible explanation for *Time's Laughingstocks's* apparent anthropocentrism. The natural world is a minimal, a marginal presence because, for those living a life in apparent 'balance' with the natural world, simple survival is challenge enough. As I have noted in my discussion of the poetry's relationship to the pastoral, *Time's Laughingstocks* presents the truths of a way of life that is hard in the extreme: with few exceptions, Hardy refuses to sentimentalize or idealize a way of life grounded in close contact with the natural world. In 'The Homecoming' (CP210), a young girl's new husband might promise to sing her 'a pretty song of lovely flowers and bees,

And happy lovers taking walks within a grove o' trees.'

(ll.23-4)

But she sees the reality of life in the country:

'I didn't think such furniture as this was all you'd own,

And great black beams for ceiling, and a floor o' wretched stone.

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<sup>777</sup> Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.81.

And nasty pewter platters, horrid forks of steel and bone,  
And a monstrous crock in chimney. 'Twas to me quite unbeknown!

(II.15-18)

Any fondness or feeling for the natural world is put squarely in perspective by the narratives of those who eke out a living on or around it. For the woman who tells her own unhappy tale in 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy', moors are 'sad' (I.8), hills 'toilsome' (I.14), and fine weather simply the source of the 'sun-blaze burning on our backs' (I.5). It is not that she is insensible to the beauty of a sunset:

I doubt if finer sight there be  
Within this royal realm.

(II.47-8)

But at the end of a wearisome twenty-mile tramp, the best of 'landskip sights' (I.15) is the 'inn that beamed thereby' (I.16).

Given the demands of this way of life, we might tentatively suggest that for many of the characters in Hardy's narratives, an appreciation of nature's beauty or of the supreme delicacy of a life lived in close relation to its seasons is an indulgence they cannot afford. Their lives are determined by grinding poverty, their precious leisure by the simple need to forget the fact. In an argument linked with the views of social ecologists, who believe that environmental crisis is an inevitable function of social inequality, theirs is a subsistence existence whose 'balance' has less to do with innate

environmental virtue than the crippling limitations of their own socioeconomic situation. Insofar as *Time's Laughingstocks* does depict a people living 'sustainably' alongside their environment, it might simply be another way of describing a life lived on the borderline between success and failure.

This may also explain why, although many of the poems in the collection look back, few do so with any obvious feeling of nostalgia. There is little sense that these things are worth saving. Whilst we might admire the idea of a life lived in a state of close and intimate dependence on the land, and offer it up as an environmental ideal, Hardy is altogether too familiar with its gritty detail to allow the illusion to survive. The idea may be sound, but its rural nineteenth century expression is one few would tolerate today and most then fled for city life.

We should therefore be very careful not to sentimentalise the past nor to project onto it some mistaken sense that previous generations knew what we do not now know. Garrard makes the same point in relation to the virtues of the 'ecological Indian', as I noted in Chapter 6. Proximity to and dependency on the natural world does not necessarily inspire environmental respect or awareness, careful stewardship, or its responsible management.

*Time's Laughingstocks* is not therefore shaped by a strong sense of the natural world as a continuing presence in our affairs. Instead, it is dominated by Hardy's preoccupation with human life and, in particular, human loves. This is the focus of the next section.

## Love



Love poems make up the bulk of the collection. Largely, however, they assume that marriage is an absurdity and romance a myth, and both are dealt with sharply. 'The Fiddler' (CP207) knows what comes of 'the lilt of his lyric wiles' (l.2): 'mangled' hearts, and 'a welter of wedded strife' (l.13, l.8).

Thus, numerous poems mock, tease, or indict the institution of marriage. There are unhappy marriages ('A Wife Waits', CP199) and infidelities (('Four Footprints', CP175). In 'The Homecoming' (CP210), a new marriage is mocked, gently. In 'The Curate's Kindness' (CP159), so is an old one: facing the workhouse, an elderly husband is condemned by a kindness to share his incarceration with a wife he hoped to escape:

To get free of her there was the one thing  
Had made the change welcome to me.

(ll.31-32)

Marriage may lead to tragedy, as it does in 'The Rash Bride' (CP212); marriage may be a trap, a snare, as it is in 'A Wife and Another' (CP217); and marriage may end the sweetest trysts because, once wed:

Our game of passion will be played,  
Our dreaming done.

('The Conformers', CP181, ll.15-6)

Love is no less fated. Despite the persistency with which they are pursued, the love affairs in *Time's Laughingstocks* mostly fail, or end in tragedy. According to *The Athenaeum's* review, the collection's 'point of view is, in one word, disillusionment,' and it 'centres upon the disillusionment of love'.<sup>778</sup> Only Hardy, one is tempted to say, could have included a set of poems entitled 'Love Lyrics' whose subject matter is love lost, love denied, love corrupted, but almost never love triumphant. The great, the grand vision has been brought to earth with an unseemly crash. There are, of course, occasional, hopeful pieces, such as 'The Night of the Dance' (CP184), but they are very occasional. The lesson is rather that the 'vows of man and maid are frail as filmy gossamere' ('The Dawn after the Dance', CP182, l.20). A suitor realises that, by comparison with a father's devoted love, his own may be 'of no worth at all' ('Her Father', CP173, l.16). At dawn, a sleeping lover suddenly seems, not a brilliant prize, 'but a sample/ Of earth's poor average kind' ('At Waking', CP174, ll.17-18), a 'vision appalling' (l.25) her partner cannot shake off. A 'dutiful daughter' marries, the husband little realising that she interrupts her honeymoon tour to meet an old lover ('Four Footprints', CP175, l.11). In 'The Minute Before Meeting' (CP191) a lover's pleasure is blighted by the thought that another separation lies beyond the reunion. In 'Her Confession' (CP188), a girl's own 'false uneagerness' (l.12) is unexpectedly met by genuine hesitation, and the caress is put off 'for ever' (l.14).

So it continues. There is jealousy ('To Carry Clavel', CP202). There is betrayal: 'why didn't you say you was promised, Rose-Ann?' ('Rose-Ann', CP209, l.1). Love falters, for reasons little understood ('In the Vaulted Way', CP176). Love is denied ('The

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<sup>778</sup> Gibson, p.55.

Orphaned Old Maid', CP203). Love is lost, unexpectedly ('The Ballad-Singer', CP194), or gained, unsought and, by implication, unwanted:

And I found that though no others had bid, a prize had been won by me.

('The Market-Girl', CP197, l.8)

Love is overlooked ('The Dear', CP226), or plain dangerous ('The Vampirine Fair', CP219). And where love does endure it is 'In the Mind's Eye' (CP177):

Change dissolves the landscapes,

She abides with me.

(ll.11-12)

Given so dark an interpretation of love, it is not surprising that, in 'Shut out that Moon' (CP164), Hardy explicitly rejects the Romantic's own emphasis on love as grand idea:

Close up the casement, draw the blind,

Shut out that stealing moon,

She bears too much the guise she wore

Before our lutes were strewn

With years-deep dust, and name we read

On a white stone were hewn.

(ll.1-6)

As Paulin remarks, this is a poem that 'brings the blinds firmly down on the pathetic fallacies of romantic moonlight and dark, Keatsian scents':<sup>779</sup>

Within the common lamp-lit room

Prison my eyes and thought;

Let dingy details crudely loom,

Mechanic speech be wrought:

Too fragrant was Life's early bloom,

Too tart the fruit it brought!

(ll.19-24)

If anything, Hardy's rejection is too emphatic, his alternative too bleak: a reader might well prefer the poem's 'magically beautiful' opening stanzas, and the late-Victorian Romanticism whose style and symbolism (note the appearance of both moon and lute) that Hardy sets out to parody.<sup>780</sup> But if Hardy inadvertently betrays a lingering fondness for the illusory comforts of idealistic love, his intent is nonetheless to signal his disengagement from romance and Romanticism.

But if love is presented as an illusion, a delusion, what then? Life without love is harder still, as the narrator of 'He Abjures Love' (CP192) inadvertently concedes. He writes as one 'who plumbs':

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<sup>779</sup> Paulin, p.92.

<sup>780</sup> Trevor Johnson, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Evans, 1968), p.70.

Life's dim profound,  
One who at length can sound  
Clear views and certain.

(II.41-44)

And to one who sees thing clearly, it is plain that a life unleavened by love is bleak indeed; for after love, 'what comes'?

A scene that lours,  
A few sad vacant hours,  
And then, the Curtain.

(II.45-48)

Love may be an illusion, but it is necessary one; without its comforts, it would be all too obvious that we really do only exist to prolong the life of the species. And that is the wider point. Marriage may be an absurdity imposed by society; love at least has its origin in instinct. To the extent that this is true – to the extent that 'love' is a name we give to a powerful and instinctual desire or need – it is a force that overwhelms all others. 'The Night of the Dance' provides an example. The first stanza captures a moment of rapport, when the natural world seems to reciprocate the interest we show in it:

The cold moon hangs to the sky by its horn,  
And centres its gaze on me;  
The stars, like eyes in a reverie,  
Their westering as for a while forbore,  
Quiz downward curiously.

(ll.1-5)

But this is a solitary, not a shared reverie: the narrator's sense that 'far and nigh things seem to know/ Sweet scenes are impending here' (ll.11-12) is perhaps, no more than his feeling:

That She will return in Love's low tongue  
My vows as well around.

(ll.19-20)

'From Her in the Country' (CP187) is still more explicit. In a variation on the game that 'The Milkmaid' (PPP, CP126) plays with the reader's expectations (see Chapter 5), the poem makes it quite clear that we are motivated primarily if not exclusively by the feelings we have for each other, not by feelings we have for the natural world. Thinking of a lover who has left for the city, a 'rural maid' (l.10) forces herself to forget her dreams 'of thy crass clanging town' (l.1), and by 'force of will' tether her thoughts to the countryside (l.4):

I said: How beautiful are these flowers, this wood,  
One little bud is far more sweet to me  
Than all man's urban shows; and then I stood  
Urging new zest for bird, and bush, and tree;

(ll.5-8)

'But it was vain', she adds; 'I could not see worth'

Enough around to charm a midge or fly,

(l.12)

Instead, she muses again 'on city din and sin', and longs to 'madness that I might move therein!' (ll.13-14).

The natural world is no match for love, for love is part of our nature, and perhaps the most natural part of us: and perhaps in recognition of the fact, and despite the fact that he was a Victorian writing in Edwardian times, Hardy therefore has some unexpected things to say about births. Indeed, his poetry is at its most sympathetic, most generous, and most tender when it concerns them. A country girl falls pregnant by a 'The Dark-Eyed Gentleman' (CP201) whose name 'I knew nought' (l.10), but over time, her sobs give way to joy at the 'fine lissom lad' who is now her 'comrade, and friend' (l.15, l.17). A pregnant girl flees what she calls 'my sin' (l.6) and hides her shame in hasty marriage to another man, knowing full well she will be found out: but it turns out that his view is simply:

I have known it all the time.

I am not a particular man;

Misfortunes are no crime:

(‘The Husband’s View’, CP208, ll.30-32)

In ‘The Christening’ (CP214), the child is ‘so superb a thing’ (l.3), a paragon fit to inspire ‘pride in the human race’ (l.11), but the poem’s point is in part the hypocrisy of those who are then shocked that the child’s mother is unmarried:

What girl is she who peeps

From the gallery stair,

Smiles palely, redly weeps,

With feverish furtive air

As though not fitly there?

(ll.16-20)

And, lest we make the false assumption that the child’s father has deserted her, the poem then subverts our own expectations of Hardy’s poetry. The father is nearby; he loves the girl dearly.

He says there is none he’d rather

Meet under moon or star



(II.28-29)

But he will not subscribe to the idea of marriage: he will not have them 'chained and doomed for life'

To slovening

As vulgar man and wife,

(II.36-8)

And at least one poem, 'Geographical Knowledge' (CP237), testifies to the power of maternal affection. A mother knows nothing of the local geography, but can point the way to Cape Horn and Calcutta:

'My son's a sailor, and he knows

All seas and many lands,

And when he's home he points and shows

Each country where it stands.

(II.17-20)

Her world is her son's world; there is no other. And this is in itself the problem. Love may simply be an evolutionary 'ruse' to ensure the survival of the species, but it is a supremely successful one. E. O. Wilson talks in terms of 'biophilia', an innate attachment to the natural world, Denis Dutton of many generations of human

development that have shaped in us a profound sensitivity to our environment (something which even extends to depictions of landscape); but this responsiveness is nothing compared to our desire to breed.<sup>781</sup> Like every other creature on the planet, we were built with selfish genes, and the instinct to succeed, to survive, that the species might survive. We are programmed to propagate, and our success has been spectacular. It took ten thousand years for humankind to reach its first billion in number (c.1800). It has taken just another two hundred to reach six billion. It is therefore difficult to see how we can talk in terms of 'biophilia' without recognising the fact that our most powerful instinct may itself be a reason for environmental crisis; that it may yet lead us to exceed the carrying capacity of the planet – which is to say, its ability to sustain a given population – an idea that Hardy through Malthus understood perfectly well. And for all the tenderness of poems like 'Geographical Knowledge' or 'The Christening', Hardy insists on asking the awkward question: if the point of it all is to propagate, who is to say that it will make the world a happier place? 'Rare and beautiful' (l.10) as a mother may think her child:

'Source of ecstatic hopes and fears  
And innocent maternal vanity,  
Your fond exploit but shapes for tears  
New thoroughfares in sad humanity.

(*'In Childbed'*, CP224, ll.13-16)

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<sup>781</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p.334. See also Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Hardy's honesty is, of course, vital to the eco-critical relevance of *Time's Laughingstocks*. As a result of it, we have a collection that tells the truths as Hardy saw them, stubborn in his refusal to sentimentalise, unwavering in his rejection of comforts. Religion is dismissed, faith scorned. Society's smug moral certainties are everywhere contested and challenged. So too is our continuing faith in love as the universal restorative: no idealized view of love as necessarily pure, disinterested or unselfish can survive the corrosive tone of this collection. And in denying the romantic, Hardy also denies us the Romantic, and the Romantic conception of the natural world, whose separateness and self-importance poems like 'The Revisitation' in any case deny. Nor does Hardy allow us the opportunity to fall back on or fall into the trap of seeing the pastoral as a viable form of dwelling.

Above all, however, Hardy's honesty allows him to deliver the central message of the collection, to which its title clearly points. 'Again and again throughout the volume', wrote one reviewer (*TLS*, 9 December, 1909), 'is the old sense of the vastness of Time and the littleness of human doings'.<sup>782</sup> As Hardy was to write of the poems in a later collection, *Moments of Vision*, 'they mortify the human sense of self-importance by showing, or suggesting, that human beings are of no matter or appreciable value in this nonchalant universe' (*LW*, p.409). So, in *Time's Laughingstocks*, human hopes are everywhere frustrated because, ultimately, they are undermined by time. It will all come to naught.

## Time

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<sup>782</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.105.

The idea that time makes a mockery of human pretension is best exemplified by the opening section of the collection, itself entitled 'Time's Laughingstocks'. It is made up of an almost unbroken series of poems whose subject is sadness or loss (CP152, CP156, CP158, CP159) or death (CP153, CP155, CP157, CP160, CP162, CP228) or even death in life: the section closes with 'The Dead Man Walking' (CP166), in which the narrator declares:<sup>783</sup>

They hail me as one living,  
But don't they know  
That I have died of late years,  
Untombed although?

(ll.1-4)

After such an unrelenting start to the collection, the reader might well turn to the next section – 'More Love Lyrics' – in the earnest hope that it will prove more cheerful. In fact, its first poem ('1967', CP167) looks forward 'five-score summers' (l.1) to the time when there will be 'nothing left of me and you' (l.4):

Beyond a pinch of dust or two;

(l.5)

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<sup>783</sup> CP228 features in the opening section of *Time's Laughingstocks* as it is presented in *CPW1*, not in the sequence given by *CP*.

And what follows rarely allows for happy endings. Mortality is constantly emphasised. The very word 'tragedy' appears in the titles of three of the collection's opening poems. Many other poems testify to the daily difficulties of Hardy's characters. There are disappointments, separations ('The Division', CP169), and partings ('On the Departure Platform', CP170); unnamed sadnesses ('In a Cathedral City', CP171) and quiet betrayals ("I say I'll Seek Her" (CP172). And Time always has the last word. The narrator of "In the Night She Came" may be adamant that, 'whatsoever weight of care':

Might strain our love, Time's mere assault

Would work no changes there.

(ll.2-4)

But a night-time visitation by a now aged lover soon cures him of that delusion. Once again, 'dull defacing Time' (l.11) is the quiet victor, as it must always be:

These market-dames, mid-aged, with lips thin-drawn,

And tissues sere,

Are they the ones we loved in years ago,

And courted here?

('Former Beauties', CP195, ll.1-4)

The narrator of 'Misconception' (CP185) similarly discovers that he cannot save a loved one from 'the diurnal spin/ Of vanities' (ll.9-10); he cannot preserve his 'Love secure/

From the world's rage' (ll.3-4); indeed, she would not wish it so. It is in these things that 'My nature revels' (l.24). One might say that this is nature: as process. Only in death can we escape Time:

Our well-beloved is prisoner in the cell  
Of Time no more.

(*'After The Last Breath'*, CP223, ll.15-16)

Reduced to its bare bones, this is a message that offers little if any hope or consolation, and it is one from which Hardy himself occasionally appears to shrink, wondering if he is a 'thinker of crooked thoughts' (l.11) who would do better to 'watch Time' while away, 'satisfied, placid, unfretting' (*'Night in the Old Home'*, CP222, l.16). And there are, after all, a small number of poems in which Hardy invokes God, if only to provide himself with something or someone to blame for the indignities that are heaped on humankind. In *'New Year's Eve'* (CP231), for example, the narrator demands to know why God created 'this earth we tread' (l.8), and gives that unthinking, 'sense-sealed' (l.18) power just enough consciousness to reply. *'God's Education'* (CP232) provides Hardy with another opportunity to confront a less than Supreme Being with its inadequacies. But Hardy's conclusion, and the concluding poem of the collection, is that existence is:

A senseless school, where we must give  
Our lives that we may learn to live!

A dolt is he who memorizes  
Lessons that leave no time for prizes.

(‘A Young Man’s Epigram on Existence’, CP245)

Confronted by the desolate outcome of his own logic – that we ‘come to live, and are called to die’ (‘Yell’ham Wood’s Story’, CP244, l.10) – it is not surprising that Hardy wondered aloud if life is better un-lived, as he does in one of the collection’s darkest poems, the ‘The Unborn’ (CP235). Its narrator (in a dream, perhaps) visits the ‘Cave of the Unborn’ (l.2), and is pressed for ‘tidings of the life to be’ (l.4):

Their eyes were lit with artless trust,

Hope thrilled their every tone;

‘A scene the loveliest, is it not?’

(ll.7-9)

The narrator’s silence and ‘sunken face’ (l.15) conveys the truth: yet the unborn are still, as the last stanza suggests:

Driven forward like a rabble rout

Into the world they had so desired

(ll.22-24)

So we continue to multiply; and so, perhaps, we may yet leave our mark. Hardy rather supposed that, in the great and incomprehensible scheme of things, humankind was insignificant, 'like meanest insects on obscurest leaves'; but it is on insects that entire eco-systems depend.<sup>784</sup> So, now, the very survival of a habitable planet depends on humankind, a species that has thus far been defined by its stunning success in shaping the natural world to its own ends, and its apparent inability to recognise the catastrophic impact of so doing. Nicholson (perhaps the most influential conservationist of his day) was optimistic when, in 1970, he wrote:

Awareness of the decisive importance and of the disturbing vulnerability of man's natural environment is bursting upon most alert and public-spirited people. The pride of having reached the moon is cancelled out by the humiliation of having gone so far towards making a slum of our own native planet.<sup>785</sup>

No other species in the history of life on this rare earth has ever been in a position to threaten the very existence of the biosphere. No other species seems so incapable of surviving sustainably or in balance with the environment. As I have already suggested in my discussion of *Poems of the Past and Present*, Hardy seems to have sensed as much. To quote again from 'The Mother Mourns' (CP76):

My species are dwindling,

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<sup>784</sup> *The Dynasts*, IX, VII, 3, CPW5, p.250.

<sup>785</sup> I have given the date of first publication; Max Nicholson, *The Environmental Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.11.



My forests grow barren,  
My popinjays fail from their tappings,  
My larks from their strain.

'My leopardine beauties are rarer,  
My tusky ones vanish,  
My children have aped my own slaughters  
To quicken my wane.

'Let me grow, then, but mildews and mandrakes,'

(II.73-81)

And therein lies the more appalling prospect: rather than die out, we may linger on in a world increasingly impoverished by our own behaviour, surviving only because of the ingenuity that helped us strip the planet of its beauty in the first place.

Hardy could not have predicted that, in the final analysis, we would in one sense triumph over time itself. He could not have known that, faced with the immense power of the earth itself, we would nonetheless prove more powerful than it: he could not have guessed that a geological age – the anthropocene – would be named for us.<sup>786</sup> But at

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<sup>786</sup> The Geological Society of America (amongst other established journals) has noted that the term anthropocene has been 'proposed and increasingly employed to denote the current interval of anthropogenic global environmental change'. It adds that 'a case can be made for its consideration as a formal epoch in that, since the start of the Industrial Revolution, Earth has endured changes sufficient to leave a global stratigraphic signature distinct from that of the Holocene or of previous Pleistocene interglacial phases, encompassing novel biotic, sedimentary, and geochemical change.' See Jan Zalasiewicz and others, 'Are we now living in the Anthropocene?' in *GSA Today*, 18 (February 2008) 1-5 (p.1).

whatever level, conscious or unconscious, considered or intuited, Hardy had begun to sense a growing disjointedness in our relationship with the environment. As Edmund Blunden (one of the most perceptive of early critics, and himself the author of a work on *Nature and Literature*) remarked in 1942:

The problem which haunted him, the process of disregard for the balance of nature, has not grown less, and his words may be of some value to those who are thinking of the rescue of all that matters from the gross haste of human power.<sup>787</sup>

He sensed, Blunden noted, 'that there was fresh and appalling disaster ahead'.<sup>788</sup> Perhaps, then, Hardy would not be so surprised that, whilst we have left and will continue to leave our own mark on the planet, our own survival is now another matter.

As I have stressed in this analysis of *Time's Laughingstocks*, the collection is remarkable not least because, taken altogether, it offers so relentless and bleak a picture of the human condition, a picture that all too readily translates into our contemporary predicament. But there is some slight hope, and perhaps paradoxically, it lies in the argument of 'Before Life and After': that consciousness has undermined a living, meaningful relationship with the natural world. It is, as the reader will note, a rather different argument to the one Hardy appears to advance in *The Dynasts*. There, humankind is shown as subject to necessity, bound by predetermined patterns of behaviour that lead to inevitable catastrophe, and have led in our own times to

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<sup>787</sup> Blunden, p.253-4.

<sup>788</sup> Blunden, p.257.

environmental crisis.<sup>789</sup> In 'Before Life and After', however, Hardy appears to reverse the argument. Here, he suggests that our unself-conscious selves lived happily, in balance, and perhaps in balance with the environment, whilst self-awareness has brought personal unhappiness, and created a barrier between us and the natural world. 'How long, how long?' (l.16) asks Hardy, before 'nescience' (l.15) reasserts itself? Clearly, it cannot, and will not. If a curse, then consciousness cannot be undone. Perhaps it is better so. Perhaps the problem, as Hardy suggests in the poem 'To Sincerity' (CP233), is not that:

Life may be sad past saying,

Its green for ever graying,

Its faiths to dust decaying;

(ll.4-6)

It is our refusal to face facts. If we would but 'look at true things' (l.13):

The real might mend the seeming.

(l.16)

Then, we might see what effect 'consciousness' has had on our relationship with the natural world. In curse, lies cure: of all the species that populate the planet, we alone

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<sup>789</sup> Indeed, Hardy copied a passage in which John Morley states that 'no creature in the universe, in its circumstances and according to its given property, can act otherwise than it does act'; Entry 1065, *LN1*, p.114.

have some sense of our predicament, our plight. Thus, the outcomes of two apparently opposed arguments begin to converge. Whether we consider our behaviour dangerously predetermined (as Hardy seems to suggest in *The Dynasts*), or instinctively balanced, and whether we consider consciousness therefore liberating or by its very nature toxic, environmental answers can only lie in an honest appreciation of what we are. And this kind of self-awareness might yet act as a counterweight to humankind's self-destructive tendency. For Hardy, Armstrong suggests, it is in consciousness that we find that fraction of freewill – that little bit of freedom – that allows us each to make our own decisions; in Pinion's words, it is on this that Hardy's faith in 'the growth of human sympathies' depends.<sup>790</sup>

It is therefore significant that, although cancelled in favour of a version (quoted in part above) that emphatically denies any hope, the original last stanza of 'The Unborn' bravely declares that such a thing might yet be possible:

A voice like Ocean's caught afar  
Rolloff on them and me: -  
"For Lovingkindness Life supplies  
A scope superber than the skies.  
So ask no more. Life's gladdening star  
In Lovingkindness see."

(CPW1, p.344)

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<sup>790</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.7; Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems*, p.85.

# Conclusion

## Introduction

The twofold aim of this Conclusion is to provide a final, formal analysis of Hardy's verse, and to summarize the findings of the thesis as a whole. The first half of the Chapter focuses on a single poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain'. This is discussed in a section entitled "'Convergence": Collision as Destiny', while the following section, 'The Beginning of the End', explains in greater detail why the poem marks a shift in the nature of Hardy's verse. The second half of the Chapter summarizes the reasons why Hardy's poetic oeuvre has a continuing relevance for the green reader. It consists of five further sections, the first of which, 'A Summing Up', introduces those that follow: 'From 'Nature' to Environment in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy'; 'The Quality of Hardy's Pessimism'; "'Enchased, lettered": Hardy's Wessex'; and finally, 'Hardy's Eco-poetic'.

## 'Convergence': Collision as Destiny

The focus of this section is a single, justly famous poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain' (CP248). Subtitled 'Lines on the Loss of the "Titanic"', it is Hardy's extraordinary account of an apparently inevitable collision between humankind and an impassive and imperturbable natural world:

Alien they seemed to be:

No mortal eye could see

The intimate welding of their later history.

(ll.25-27)

Hardy's poem provides us with an intriguing insight into his attitude towards what was, by 1912, a recognizably modern world. That world – the world with which we are now familiar – was forged in part by a continuing series of dramatic changes brought about by improvements in technology. Those changes were everywhere in evidence during Hardy's long lifetime. Born in a world still dominated by horse and cart in which the penny post was a recent innovation, Hardy lived to see the rise of railways and telegraphs and then automobiles, aircraft and telephones. These material changes utterly transformed the way in which life was lived. They are in part only the most visible signs of a series of developments that ultimately, if selectively, made life safer and more secure for those in what we would now consider advanced industrialised countries, prolonging life expectancy and raising the standard of living. Yet these changes are the very things that are so often missing from Hardy's writing. There *are* notable instances when Hardy engages with the kind of technology that is transforming society. One thinks of the threshing machine in *Tess*, or her encounter with the train onto which she and Angel load milk early one morning, marvelling that it will be in London in time for somebody's breakfast (*TD*, p.325-6, p.186-7). But these are surprisingly isolated instances, a fact firmly underlined by the verse. Modern technology has no place in *The Dynasts*, clearly, but across Hardy's verse collections, there are

very few encounters with trains or automobiles or any of the other extraordinary innovations that formed such a prominent part of the Victorian and Edwardian sense of achievement. A train features in 'On the Departure Platform' (CP170), by implication; the telegram overtakes the letter in 'A Wife in London' (CP61); and in a much later poem, 'Nobody Comes' (CP715), Hardy includes the car and the telegraph; but these are largely incidental aspects of the handful of poems that provide us with any clue that Hardy is not writing in the early nineteenth rather than the early twentieth century.

Hardy's reluctance to engage with these technological innovations is, in itself, telling, and it reflects a certain caution, a certain reluctance to embrace developments to which outwardly at least he was already entirely reconciled. (The writer of *Wessex Poems*, *Poems of the Past and Present*, *The Dynasts*, and *Time's Laughingstocks*, was also, of course, the metropolitan man of letters who took rooms in town for the season and holidayed abroad, taking full advantage of the flexibility brought by steamship and steam-train.) For the eco-critic, that reluctance is unfortunate, even frustrating. The transformative power of modern technology is, as I suggested in Chapter 1, one of the reasons frequently advanced by environmentalists for our current environmental predicament. It is therefore surprising that, amidst so much change, Hardy appears to take so little notice of it.

The point may be underlined by contrasting Hardy's poetic oeuvre with a contemporary – and chillingly prescient – short story by E. M. Forster. Entitled 'The Machine Stops' (1909), it is Forster's account of a dystopian future in which humankind's dependence on technology has become absolute. With the surface of the earth laid waste, humankind has retreated underground, where life is lived within the

cells of a giant machine that provides for our every need. (We are just a short step from the still bleaker, film world of *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), where the machine that enabled humankind to exploit the natural world as a standing reserve now exploits humankind in the same way, as just another source of energy, neatly inverting the argument of Heidegger's 1955 essay.) For many, the machine is now God. For one solitary dissenter, it marks the end of humankind.

We created the machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of our sense of space and of the sense of touch [...] it has paralyzed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it.<sup>791</sup>

Humankind exists only 'as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries'.<sup>792</sup>

The root of Forster's dystopian future is humankind's presumption that it is superior to and independent of that natural world, that, through technology, it is insulated from it.

Night and day, wind and storm, tide and earthquakes, impeded man no longer. He had harnessed Leviathan. All the old literature, with its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child.<sup>793</sup>

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<sup>791</sup> E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*, ed. by Rod Mengham (London: Andre Deutsch, 1997), p.105.

<sup>792</sup> Forster, p.106.

<sup>793</sup> Forster, p.94.



In Forster's future, however, those who made the machine are long dead, and the machine cannot fix its own faults. In its state of learned but now helpless dependence, humankind's demise is simply a matter of time. A now hostile natural world will inevitably reassert itself.

Forster's short story was published in the same year as *Time's Laughingstocks*. Comparison is unavoidable. Hardy looks back, Forster looks forward: Hardy to a past we cannot recover, Forster to a future we will not survive. And one small but telling detail suggests that Forster intended us to draw the comparison. In 'The Machine Stops', those who rebel against their submerged, subterranean life of enforced dependency are exiled to the earth's surface, which 'supports life no longer': exile is therefore called 'homelessness'.<sup>794</sup> But when the story's protagonist escapes to that surface world – a world in which he cannot survive – he finds himself in a region called 'Wessex': as he remarks, 'happy the man, happy the woman, who awakes the hills of Wessex'.<sup>795</sup>

Forster could have picked any name for the imaginary region into which his hero stumbles; he could even have chosen one that did not owe its reappearance to another writer; but he nonetheless chose 'Wessex'. Perhaps Forster was tipping his cap to a famous writer, well aware of the profound popularity and deep cultural significance of Hardy's literary construct. But it also possible that Forster chose to call his blighted surface world 'Wessex' – a world to which there is no practical possibility of return – to underline the point that Hardy himself could not 'return' to Wessex, any more than could that legion of Hardy devotees who immersed themselves in his partly real, partly

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<sup>794</sup> Forster, p.108.

<sup>795</sup> Forster, p.105.

fictional world, and followed Herman Lea in searching out the actual behind the imagined. Insofar as Wessex ever existed, it existed no longer. Its significance was spent. Whatever the future, it was better to look to it.

But whether or not this is an accurate interpretation of its significance, Wessex is not the sum of Hardy. In occasional but striking poems, he steps outside the self-imposed boundaries of his literary kingdom, and engages with the thoroughly modern moment. 'The Convergence of the Twain' (hereafter, simply 'Convergence') is an excellent case in point, and it allows me to examine the distinctive if oblique way in which Hardy does indeed consider the question of technology.

'Convergence' is, of course, a much anthologized, but also a very unusual poem.<sup>796</sup> Its author is a grand old man of English letters, respected and reputable; its subject is the sinking of a great new ocean liner, the Titanic, and the loss of many people, some of them known to Hardy; and it was written with great speed, just a few days after the tragedy. Yet the poem is 'not a personal lament; it is a philosophic statement'.<sup>797</sup> There is no direct description or dramatization of the Titanic setting sail or sinking, and no reference whatsoever to those who lived through or died in the accident. Instead, the poem opens with a strange yet strangely beguiling vision of the sunken ship lying still on the sea bed, surrounded by sea-worms and 'moon-eyed fishes':

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<sup>796</sup> 'Convergence' is not without precedent, as Armstrong explains, noting its similarities to a poem by an American, Celia Thaxter, published some decades earlier. The parallels are certainly striking, but the nature or extent of any influence is difficult to prove and in any case does not make Hardy's poem any less unexpected in its approach. Tim Armstrong, 'Hardy, Thaxter, and History as Coincidence in "The Convergence of the Twain"', *Victorian Poetry*, 1 (1992), 29-42 (pp.30-33).

<sup>797</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.266.

I

In a solitude of the sea  
Deep from human vanity,  
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres  
Of her salamandrine fires,  
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III

Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent  
The sea worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed  
To ravish the sensuous mind  
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near  
Gaze at the gilded gear

And query: 'What does this vaingloriousness down here?'...

There is a truly visionary imagination at work in these opening stanzas. A century on, deep sea submersibles have shown us exactly how strange and alien this undersea world is, but it is no stranger than the one Hardy imagined here, in haste, in 1912. The impression is reinforced by a succession of beautifully judged metaphors: note how, in the second stanza, for example, the ship's steel boilers – engines of its fate – are imagined as funeral pyres. The strangeness of the scene is only amplified by Hardy's choice and use of language. There is a succession of odd, obscure, or unusual words or constructions, amongst them 'stilly', 'salamandrine', 'thrid', and 'bleared'. Alliteration forms an insistent part of every stanza: 'solitude of the sea' (I); 'cold currents' (II); 'mirrors meant' (III); 'jewels in joy', and 'lie lightless' (IV); 'gaze at the gilded gear' (V). Indeed, it is difficult to read these opening stanza aloud without being struck by the number of words that start with the letter 's' or end with a marked sibilance ('glass', 'lightless'). Furthermore, the lines of each stanza share the same end-rhyme (A/A/A); and whilst it is difficult to calculate the cumulative effect of Hardy's technical choices or judge their impact on the individual reader, some may find that they create a hypnotic, even hallucinatory quality superbly suited to the scene these stanzas visualize. Yet lines do not necessarily run smoothly, one into another: the structure of each three-line stanza is built around a last line as long as the other two combined, and within that last line, stanza by stanza, the balance shifts: read aloud, it becomes obvious that the final

line is deliberately contrived – or ‘engineered’, in Davie’s words – to unsettle the reader’s expectation of where its weight will lie.<sup>798</sup>

Davie’s observation is a suggestive one. Indeed, Davie famously observed that ‘Convergence’ is like a carefully calculated, a ‘sleek and powerful’, machine, whose ‘rhymes slide home like pistons inside cylinders, ground exactly to fractions of a millimeter’.<sup>799</sup> Hardy is no self-educated provincial or rural naïf: on the contrary, ‘dazzling compositions’ like ‘Convergence’ prove that he is ‘the poet of technology’.<sup>800</sup> Even the shape of the stanzas (argues Armstrong) ‘resembles a ship low in the water, a kind of picture poetry known, here rather fittingly, as “technopaignia”’.<sup>801</sup>

Davie’s argument is, however, debatable. Whether or not Hardy’s technical proficiency makes him ‘the laureate of engineering’, as Davie argues, his case for ‘Convergence’ as an immaculate piece of Edwardian engineering is not quite as ‘unanswerable’ as he elsewhere suggests.<sup>802</sup> Some might even find the lop-sided rhythm of the last lines the very antithesis of smooth and symmetrical precision engineering, and discover that they repeatedly stumble over cumbersome, clumsy words like ‘vaingloriousness’. And Davie’s observation is, in any case, an odd one to make of a poem about a ship whose fate pointedly contradicts the widely held belief that (as Armstrong remarks) she was a ‘peak in mechanical progress’.<sup>803</sup>

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<sup>798</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.23.

<sup>799</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.17.

<sup>800</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.17.

<sup>801</sup> Armstrong, ‘Hardy, Thaxter, and History as Coincidence’, 29-42 (p.39). For a note on ‘technopaignia’, see Taylor, *Hardy’s Metres*, p.189, but note that Taylor does not share Armstrong’s view, nor refer to ‘Convergence’.

<sup>802</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, p.17, p.23.

<sup>803</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.139.

Is the poem therefore a paean to technology, or a condemnation of it? The answer is, of course, neither. Its real subject is the pride – the presumption – of those who thought the Titanic unsinkable, and the vanity of those who fashioned its 'gilded gear' to dazzle and beguile. Bailey suggests that Hardy may have read an article in the *Dorset County Chronicle* published three days after the tragedy, which talked in just these terms and, quite specifically, of the 'pride that dared the elements'; Armstrong notes that 'the Sunday after the disaster the Bishop of Winchester sermonized that "the *Titanic*, name and thing, will stand for a monument and warning to human presumption"<sup>804</sup> (In context, therefore, Hardy's choice of 'vaingloriousness', a word on which the reader must linger if it is to be read aright, seems suddenly inspired.) 'Technology' is not at fault; it is only our application of it; only, perhaps, our assumption that it can insulate us from the natural world, or protect us from the consequences of what we do to it.<sup>805</sup> As Macfarlane notes, we live in a moment of 'disembodiment and dematerialisation'.<sup>806</sup> But whilst we may have lost touch with the environment through our attempt at its technological domination, the inadvertent consequences of that attempt (in the form of, for example, climate change and atmospheric pollution) may

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<sup>804</sup> Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, p.265; Armstrong, 'Hardy, Thaxter, and History as Coincidence', 29-42 (p.29).

<sup>805</sup> Writing just a few years (1933) after Hardy's death, Leavis and Thompson were clear that 'the great agent of change, and, from our point of view, destruction, has of course been the machine – applied power' (*Culture and Environment*, p.3). But our relationship to technology is necessarily more complicated than this. Technological advances have made it possible for us to do enormous damage to the environment, but it is through those same advances that we have become aware of our impact on the environment. And whilst the critic would point out that we would nonetheless be far better off had we never been cursed by it, the apologist would counter that in technology lies our salvation. In the more measured language of Daniel B. Botkin, 'a harmony between ourselves and nature depends on – indeed requires – modern technological tools to teach us about the Earth and help us to manage wisely what we realize we have inadvertently begun to unravel' (Botkin, p.189).

<sup>806</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007), p.203.

reconnect us sooner than we anticipate.<sup>807</sup> This, for Ulrich Beck, is the supreme irony: the very perfection of our 'scientific-technical society' has exposed us to 'global risks' which, nonetheless, we cannot properly predict: 'we don't know, what it is we don't know - but from this dangers arise, which threaten mankind!'<sup>808</sup>

In 'Convergence', Hardy leaves us in no doubt of what follows from this false sense that we are somehow separate, special. Pivoting around the first word of a central, sixth stanza, the poem shifts its focus from the accident's aftermath to the story of how ship and 'Shape of Ice' were brought inevitably together.

## VI

Well: while was fashioning

This creature of cleaving wing,

The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

## VII

Prepared a sinister mate

For her – so gaily great –

A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

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<sup>807</sup> Murphie and Potts, p.200.

<sup>808</sup> 'The narrative of risk is a narrative of irony. This narrative deals with the involuntary satire, the optimistic futility, with which the highly developed institutions of modern society - science, state, business and military - attempt to anticipate what cannot be anticipated.' Professor Ulrich Beck, 'Living In The World Risk Society', the *Hobhouse Memorial Public Lecture* given on Wednesday 15th February 2006 at LSE, in *Economy and Society*, 35.3 (2006), 329-345 (p.329).

It is, of course, entirely appropriate that Hardy should invoke the Immanent Will, on which he hung his sense of the interconnectedness of all life, and through it point to the possibility that a force greater than our own might yet order or organize our fate. And our fate is as inextricably bound up with that of the natural world as the Titanic's was with that of the 'sinister mate' fashioned for it. We only imagine that we are separate from or independent of the environment on which we depend. In fact, we are an indissoluble part of it. (This too, has its echo in the poem's construction, which consists of eleven stanzas, a prime number that cannot therefore be divided in two.)

Yet, nonetheless, we insist on picking a path towards a collision still more shocking than the one that sank the Titanic. Humankind may not survive it. Even if greatly diminished, the natural world will. Hardy called the engine-room fire's 'salamandrine', since the salamanders of legend can survive fires.<sup>809</sup> To quote Lynn Margulis (with whom James Lovelock initially developed the concept of gaia):

We cannot put an end to nature; we can only pose a threat to ourselves. The notion that we can destroy all life, including bacteria thriving in the water tanks of nuclear power plants or boiling hot vents, is ludicrous.<sup>810</sup>

So, in the opening stanzas of 'Convergence', creatures hidden 'deep from human vanity' blink myopically at these relics of our hubris or, like the sea-worm, crawl over them 'grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent'. It is tempting to compare Hardy's sea-bed scene with the relics of Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818):

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<sup>809</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.139.

<sup>810</sup> Quoted in Porritt, *Playing Safe*, p.15.



"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>811</sup>

But perhaps a more exact, if surprising parallel may be found in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) a children's novel by Kenneth Grahame. It can, of course, be written off as a charming but inconsequential and entirely unrealistic fantasy, steeped in nostalgia for a land of lost content.<sup>812</sup> It can even be (and indeed, has been) rewritten from the perspective of the down-trodden inhabitants of the Wild Wood, who have little patience for the antics of their spoilt social betters.<sup>813</sup> However, this is not the sum of Grahame's novel. In one exchange between its anthropomorphized animal characters, there is a striking discussion about the extensive system of tunnels and passages that lie below the Wild Wood. They are, the reader discovers, the remnants of a once great city '- a city of people, you know':

'They were a powerful people, and rich, and great builders. They built to last, for they thought their city would last for ever.'

'But what has become of them all?' asked the Mole.

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<sup>811</sup> *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.860.

<sup>812</sup> See Drabble, pp.256-266.

<sup>813</sup> The book in question is Jan Needle's *Wild Wood* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1981).

'Who can tell?' said the Badger. 'People come – they stay for a while, they flourish, they build – and they go. It is their way. But we remain. There were badgers here, I've been told, long before that same city ever came to be. And now there are badgers here again. We are an enduring lot, and we may move out for a time, but we wait, and are patient, and back we come. And so it will ever be.'<sup>814</sup>

### The Beginning of the End

As I suggested in my Introduction, 'Convergence' is important not only for the light it sheds on Hardy's views, but because it marks a shift or change in the nature of Hardy's poetic output that may in part reflect a wider change of mood. The loss of the Titanic, notes Armstrong, was immediately seen by contemporaries 'as the end of the "gilded age" of Victorian progress and Edwardian plenty'.<sup>815</sup> The extent of that break – that discontinuity – is underlined by a second and still greater catastrophe that followed shortly afterwards. Although 'Convergence' was issued in book form that August, 1912, it stood alone, in an edition 'limited to ten copies'; it was not properly collected until Hardy's next verse collection, *Satires of Circumstance*, which was published on 17 November, 1914.<sup>816</sup> By then, Europe was at war. As Henry James, then aged seventy, wrote on 5 August:

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<sup>814</sup> Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.48.

<sup>815</sup> Armstrong, 'Hardy, Thaxter, and History as Coincidence', 29–42 (p.29).

<sup>816</sup> Although Hardy published limited editions of other single poems, this is sufficiently unusual to indicate the significance with which Hardy regarded the loss of the Titanic, if not of the importance he attached to the poem itself. Purdy, p.150.

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words.<sup>817</sup>

'Oh yes, war is doomed', Hardy told William Archer in February, 1901; 'doomed by the gradual growth of the introspective faculty in mankind'.<sup>818</sup> Naturally, Hardy was surprised by the outbreak of war, and its scale and violence shook 'his whole framework of assumptions'.<sup>819</sup> The recognition that 'we are living in a more brutal age', Hardy wrote in a letter of 28 August, 1914, 'does not inspire one to write hopeful poetry, or even conjectural prose'.<sup>820</sup>

Hardy's response suggests that the outbreak of war prompted a significant shift in the tone of his poetic output. It is, however, arguable whether war upended Hardy's views, or simply confirmed them. Although published in November 1914, the poems in *Satires of Circumstance* were (with a few exceptions) written before the outbreak of war, yet the tone of the collection is, as Fussell remarks, 'ready-made' for rendering a tragedy so 'immense and unprecedented'.<sup>821</sup> Lytton Strachey's review of the collection emphasizes why: its desolation is 'complete': 'mortality, and the cruelties of time, and

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<sup>817</sup> Quoted by Bernard Bergonzi, 'Late Victorian to Modernist (1880-1930)' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*, ed. by Rogers, pp.347-391 (p.377).

<sup>818</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.379.

<sup>819</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.461.

<sup>820</sup> *SL*, p.288.

<sup>821</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975, repr. 1977), p.7.

the ironic irrevocability of things – these are the themes upon which Mr Hardy has chosen to weave his grave and moving representations.<sup>822</sup>

'As if by uncanny foresight', then, Hardy's collection seems to anticipate 'the events of the war just beginning', a war that brought 'cataclysmic changes in life and thought and social forms', and profoundly affected post-war poetry.<sup>823</sup> The explanation may in part be that, by then, Hardy's life and work had been transformed – some would say overwhelmed – by another and much more personal tragedy: the death of his wife Emma, on 27 November, 1912. That death is, of course, commemorated in the 'Poems of 1912-13', a sequence in *Satires of Circumstance* that for many critics and common readers constitutes 'the apogee of his lyrical achievement'.<sup>824</sup> Tomalin considers this the moment 'when Thomas Hardy became a great poet', and Millgate notes that it is 'by general consent' that these poems are regarded as 'probably the highest point of his achievement in verse'.<sup>825</sup> By the mid-1920s, writers like Walter de la Mare, Middleton Murry, and 'even the young enfant terrible' I. A. Richards had already singled out the 'Poems of 1912-13' for 'their highest accolades', whilst Johnson adds that poets 'as diverse' as Graves, Auden, Day Lewis, and Dylan Thomas 'have all admired them unreservedly'.<sup>826</sup> Certainly Emma's death unleashed 'a flood of creative energy', and the effect was quantitative as well as qualitative.<sup>827</sup> By Morgan's recent count, Emma

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<sup>822</sup> Lytton Strachey, from a *New Statesman* review of 19 December, 1914, in *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed. by Gibson and Johnson, p.66, p.65.

<sup>823</sup> Fussell, p.4. Fussell's opening chapter is entitled 'Satire of Circumstance', and his first sub-title is 'Thomas Hardy, Clairvoyant'; Bergonzi, in Rogers, pp.347-391 (p.377).

<sup>824</sup> Trevor Johnson, "'Time Was Away": A Pair of Blue Eyes and the Poems of 1912-13', in *A Mere Interlude*, ed. by Melissa Hardie (Newmill: Patten Press, 1992), pp.37-58 (p.37).

<sup>825</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy – The Time-Torn Man* (London: Viking, 2006), p.xvii; Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.459.

<sup>826</sup> Johnson, in *A Mere Interlude*, ed. by Hardie, pp.37-58 (p.39).

<sup>827</sup> Purdy, p.166.

inspired only five poems whilst she was alive (Johnson counts only two) but another 110 after her death.<sup>828</sup> This is a significant proportion of Hardy's later poetry and, regardless of exact figures, it suggests the extent to which Hardy's poetry can be divided into those poems written and published before Emma's death, and those published after it.<sup>829</sup>

Taken altogether, there seems little doubt that Hardy's grief at losing Emma and his shock at the brutality of war shaped a bleaker and more introverted outlook. As Millgate remarks, Hardy's 'vision of the future' was thereafter to become 'much darker'.<sup>830</sup> Farewell, he wrote in a poem dated December 1914, to 'manners, amenities' (l.65):

Fighting, smiting,

Running through;

That's now the civilized

Thing to do.'

(*'A Jingle on the Times'*, CP939, ll.69-72)

Insofar as 'Convergence' anticipates this change in Hardy's outlook, therefore, it provides me with an obvious opportunity to draw my argument to a close, and set out my findings.

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<sup>828</sup> Johnson, in *A Mere Interlude*, ed. by Hardie, pp.37-58 (p.51); Professor William Morgan's lecture, 'Life Story: a Biography of Hardy's Emma Poems', was delivered at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Thomas Hardy Conference on 28 July 2008.

<sup>829</sup> The last poem in Gibson's collection is CP948; *Satires of Circumstance* opens with CP246. Given that Gibson places uncollected poems and fragments at the end of the collection; that some of the poems in *Satires* were written before Emma's death; and that a number of those published in collections after her death were nonetheless first written before it, it should be clear that this crude comparison may itself underestimate the impact of that death on Hardy's subsequent output.

<sup>830</sup> Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.379.

## A Summing Up

A century after the sinking of the Titanic, there is increasing (if not incontrovertible) evidence that human activity will one day melt the polar icecaps, and with them all the icebergs in the world. Few seem genuinely disturbed by the possibility; most remain sceptical. Yet this is where we now stand. Some years after phrases like 'global warming' and 'climate change' entered our collective vocabulary, we are still no nearer to establishing the kinds of agreement that turn ideas into meaningful action. On the contrary, there is increasing evidence that a fragile consensus is itself coming apart.<sup>831</sup> Perhaps this is just another aspect of the 'new Dark Age' whose coming Hardy predicted in the immediate aftermath of the Great War; but then, our apparently unshakeable belief that all will be well rather resembles the ancient spirit of hubris that he detected in the tragic story of the Titanic, and to which 'Convergence' testifies.<sup>832</sup>

And from the point of view of the eco-critic, Hardy's willingness to take 'a full look at the Worst' is one of his most interesting (and characteristic) qualities.<sup>833</sup> The pessimistic tone of collections like *Time's Laughingstocks* is also a reason why some of his readers prefer to sidestep his verse, or read it only in selections that dilute his unrelenting and unswerving determination to see humankind as it really is. The

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<sup>831</sup> *The Spectator* provides a snapshot from 2010 in its salute to 'The global warming guerrillas' who uncovered 'the spin and deception that finally cracked the consensus'; from the perspective of any environmental activist, headlines like these (and there are many others) are symptomatic of the response of those who, having so far failed to make any sacrifices to the cause of living sustainably, nonetheless recoil from the suggestion that they might one day have to do so. See Matt Ridley, in *The Spectator*, 6 February 2010, p.14.

<sup>832</sup> 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, in *CP*, p.560.

<sup>833</sup> 'In Tenebris II', *CP*137, l.14.

advantage of an eco-critical approach is that it has no reason to downplay or marginalise this aspect of Hardy's thought.

But this is not the only reason to reread Hardy from a 'green' perspective. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate throughout this thesis, an eco-critical approach highlights aspects of Hardy's verse that have hitherto been neglected or overlooked, and reinterprets their significance in the context of emerging ideas about the environment and our relationship to it. In part, this is an exercise in creating an alternative tradition of green writing, by noting the extent to which a writer like Hardy was already engaging with issues and ideas that we would now recognise as central to the environmental debate. But it also becomes apparent that Hardy anticipated contemporary ideas in sometimes troubling and provocative ways.

In the final sections of this concluding Chapter I have, therefore, chosen to return to and reconsider the most eco-critically relevant (and significant) aspects of Hardy's poetic oeuvre. In the first of these sections, 'From "Nature" to Environment in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy', I consider the way in which Hardy's poetry signals an important shift away from the concept of 'Nature' to a recognisably modern sense of 'environment'. In the next section, 'The Quality of Hardy's Pessimism', I once again engage with Hardy's particular, to some peculiar view of human existence. In the section that follows it, "Enchased, lettered": Hardy's Wessex', I revisit the partly imaginary (bio)region which is so central to Hardy's work and, indeed, to his eco-critical significance. In the fourth and final section, I highlight the reasons why Hardy's poetry deserves recognition as poetry, and why I therefore believe it constitutes an eco-poetic of continuing interest and relevance.

## From 'Nature' to Environment in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy

'Thomas Hardy', wrote Beach, 'sounds the death-knell of the old nature-poetry' – the observation is worth repeating – and it is true that Hardy's verse marks the disappearance of the Victorian concept of 'Nature' described in Chapter 2.<sup>834</sup> It can be argued, of course, that its loss was anything but a piece of good fortune for the environment. From an eco-critical perspective, there may be a link between the demystification and desacralization of 'Nature', and its desecration. An indifferent and empty universe is, like a view of the natural world as a site of inevitable struggle where only the fittest survive, hardly likely to encourage humankind in a more tolerant and understanding approach to its environment.

However, it is also noteworthy that, for all its apparent importance to the better educated (and influential) Victorians, 'love of Nature' did not translate into widespread or effective outcry at the way in which industrialisation was transforming great swathes of the nation into what might literally be described as 'black country'. Amidst so much human suffering and social injustice, this is not, perhaps, surprising; but that failure to respond in any systematic or meaningful way may also reflect the fact that 'Nature' was already an abstract concept, far removed from, and easily forgotten amidst industrial and urban realities.

Hardy's poetry is therefore significant not only because of its reluctant concession that the universe could not be read for signs of God or gods. *That* reflects a

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<sup>834</sup> Beach, p.521, p.503.



general disillusionment with the concept of 'Nature' anticipated by Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Arnold. In other respects, Hardy's own verse goes far beyond the position of his contemporaries, rivalling Meredith for the scale and nature of its engagement with new ideas. In sometimes striking and bold ways, it points forward, towards our own, still developing perspectives on the environment.

The end of 'Nature' is also, therefore, a beginning. 'If Nature's defects must be looked in the face and transcribed,' remarked Hardy in *The Life*, 'the art lies in making these defects the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty' (*LW*, p.118). And the beauty towards which Hardy's verse and verse drama gestures is a complex vision of the interlocking nature of all life that has clear links to modern concepts of ecology and environment.

Although difficult to trace with absolute certainty, the development of Hardy's ideas is apparent from the order in which he published his verse and verse-drama. In *Wessex Poems*, for example, Hardy is shown wrestling with the logical consequences of his scepticism towards conventional Christian and, to some extent, Romantic views of the natural world. Nature is 'glow-forsaken', and the natural world revealed for what it is: a site of conflict and strife, where 'Earth's Frail lie bleeding of her Strong'.<sup>835</sup> Nor is there any apparent meaning to that struggle in a natural world built blindly, without thought or care; and occasionally, Hardy appears to reconcile himself to the idea that the rhythms of 'blackbird and bee' are simply the result of 'mechanic artistry'.<sup>836</sup>

However, it is also clear that Hardy doubted if life could ever be adequately explained by – and reduced to – an entirely mechanistic and materialistic

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<sup>835</sup> 'To Outer Nature', l.21, and 'A Sign-Seeker', l.33.

<sup>836</sup> 'My Cicely', CP31, l.120, and 'To a Motherless Child', l.13.

interpretation.<sup>837</sup> In 'Heiress and Architect', for example, he confronts exactly this kind of life-denying logic. And in singular poems like 'A Meeting with Despair', Hardy hints at the complex interrelationship that blurs the boundary between subject and object, and casts doubt on the very power of reason to explain the relationship.

In fact, the most important aspect of Hardy's engagement with the concept of 'Nature' is revealed in his next collection, *Poems of the Past and Present*, in which he explores the meaning of Darwin's suggestion that all life is linked. Hardy had a rare sympathy for all living things and a real empathy with their sufferings; it may be that he did not need Darwin to tell him that life forms a whole, and we form just another part of it. But in a short series of remarkable poems, opening with 'An August Midnight' and closing with 'The Darkling Thrush', Hardy nonetheless reveals a feeling for the non-human that extends beyond the bio-centric to an eco-centric appreciation of life on earth. And there is no doubt that Hardy was deeply influenced by Darwin's recognition that 'all organic creatures are of one family,' (*LW*, p.373), which immediately suggests a reason to value the natural world that is quite independent of its use to us. As Hardy wrote (in a reference I have already quoted):

Few people seem to perceive fully as yet that the most far-reaching consequence of the establishment of the common origin of all species is ethical; that it logically involved a re-adjustment of altruistic morals by enlarging as a *necessity of rightness* the application of what has been called "The Golden Rule" beyond the area of mere mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom. (*LW*, p.376-7)

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<sup>837</sup> 'I am utterly bewildered to understand how the doctrine that, beyond the knowable, there must always be an unknown, can be displaced'; *LW*, p.400.

In his next major work, however, Hardy goes still further, by extrapolating from the idea of the 'world-webs' woven by 'the Mother' the striking concept of the Immanent Will.<sup>838</sup> *The Dynasts* is a generally underrated work, but also a remarkable one, and from an eco-critical perspective, its most extraordinary feature is its assertion that human beings may be 'viewed as members of one corporeal frame' (LW, p.235), bound together in a web that emphasizes the inevitability of cause and effect across all living things.

But the concept of the Immanent Will is surprising not only because it appears to anticipate ideas of our own, such as Lovelock's contemporary reworking of the gaia myth. It is remarkable because it was Hardy who conceived of it. Hardy is not, as I have stressed, an environmentalist before the fact. Whilst aspects of his life and work demonstrate a close kinship with the natural world, much of his verse focuses firmly on his own kind. Hardy has rightly and repeatedly been described as a humanist – even a 'scientific humanist' – and a collection of verse like his next, *Time's Laughingstocks*, is dominated by human stories and scenes: the non-human world is glimpsed only occasionally, and the Immanent Will barely at all.<sup>839</sup> Yet *Time's Laughingstocks* is itself a significant and sustained demonstration of another remarkable aspect of Hardy's verse and verse drama: that humbling insistence on humankind's limitations and littleness which contemporaries and critics called his 'pessimism'.

### **The Quality of Hardy's Pessimism**

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<sup>838</sup> 'The Lacking Sense', CP80, I.3, I.1.

<sup>839</sup> See Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, pp.5-7.

More than one critic has, over the years, described Hardy's outlook as 'perverse and gloomy', and Hardy's pessimism is an important influence on all his work, and his verse in particular.<sup>840</sup> Clearly, Hardy's turn of mind reflects his early exposure to a (rural) way of life that was hard, sometimes brutish, and short.<sup>841</sup> But Hardy's education was anything but limited, and his pessimism is better thought of as the considered if idiosyncratic response of a sensitive, intelligent, and well-educated thinker who immersed himself in the issues of the day. It reflects, in part, his loss of faith, and his growing feeling that humankind had outgrown a universe that was at best utterly indifferent to human needs and wants. It reflects the immensities of time and space revealed by geologist and astronomer, which simply underlined his sense of humankind's insignificance, his sense that, *sic transit*, its achievements would one day come to nought. It also reflects a historically informed appreciation of humankind's own limitations and a clear-sighted recognition that the triumph of 'progress' was partial at best. This was a lesson of history; the reality of his own day was just as sobering. 'In the past century,' Hardy wrote in 1900, 'material growth has been out of all proportion to moral growth' (LW, p.330). And this too is reflected in his way of thinking and feeling, as when he sat at Southampton Docks in 1899, and watched the troops set sail:

To argue in the selfsame bloody mode

Which this late age of thought, and pact, and code,

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<sup>840</sup> Marsden, p.7.

<sup>841</sup> 'I well remember the cholera-years', he wrote of his early life in Dorset (LW, p.423), and although his own early life was relatively privileged, he was not a strong child, and 'his very survival into adulthood was long in doubt'; Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, p.21.

Still fails to mend.

(‘Embarcation’, CP54, ll.6-8).

But Hardy, whilst a pessimist, was not a fatalist; indeed, he preferred the term ‘meliorist’ (LW, p.420). Even as war confounded ‘his old view of the gradual bettering of human nature’ (LW, p.395), a view that found expression in poems like ‘The Sick Battle-God’ (CP97), he clung to the possibility of hope. And the focus of his hope remained humankind itself.

For the eco-critic, Hardy’s emphasis is doubly important. His determination to ‘diagnose the complaint – in this case human ills – and ascertain the cause’ (LW, p.413) results in a forceful and honest account of the human condition that allows for its losses and difficulties whilst pinpointing its follies. We may talk of technology or population growth as aspects of environmental crisis, but they are not the real issue: it is we who have shaped and created our predicament.<sup>842</sup> So it is useful to summarise two of Hardy’s most important and relevant arguments about ‘this collective personality, Humanity’ (LW, p.449), and the way in which humankind might yet supply answers to the problem it has become.

The first argument relates to what may be described as the curse of consciousness. As Hardy suggests in ‘Before Life and After’ (CP230), it can be argued that the rise of human self-awareness destroyed an instinctively balanced relationship with the natural world, creating a barrier where none existed before; and consciousness

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<sup>842</sup> This is a trap into which J. B. Priestley, himself a ‘junior Edwardian’ (p.7), falls in his discussion of the loss of the Titanic. A ‘rapidly developing technology’, he wrote, ‘is always in danger of *hubris*’ (p.232). But technology has no agency. This is not Hardy’s mistake, as ‘The Convergence of the Twain’ demonstrates. J. B. Priestley, *The Edwardians* (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp.225-232.

cannot be wished away. In *The Dynasts*, however, Hardy suggests that we might one day develop some kind of collective consciousness, some realisation of the inextricable links that bind us to our environment and to every other living thing. Like its scientifically informed modern equivalent, 'gaia', Hardy's concept of the 'Immanent Will' is itself proof of the rise of that kind of wider awareness. Emerging into consciousness, we might also learn to reconnect with our own innate biophilia – and perhaps this is also what Hardy meant by the slow and steady growth of 'lovingkindness'.

Hardy's second argument is that our behaviour is instinctively selfish and short-sighted; we are bound by predetermined patterns of behaviour of a kind that lead inevitably to (environmental) disaster. But Hardy also allows for the possibility that humankind might still possess a degree of free will. And if through consciousness – intelligence – we come to recognise our impact on the natural world, that tiny portion of free will might allow us the chance to choose differently in the future; and perhaps Hardy's verse and verse drama makes it possible to think (and feel) in these terms.

### **'Enchased, lettered': Hardy's Wessex**

*Time's Laughingstocks* is important not only because it paints so unremittingly bleak a picture of human nature, but because (after the broad sweep of *The Dynasts*) it returns the focus to Wessex, the partly real, partly imagined construct that is so important to our understanding of Hardy's eco-critical significance. In this respect, the verse is, if not a commentary on, then certainly a continuation of Hardy's other work; from *Wessex Tales* (1888) to 'The Wessex Novels' (as they were all retrospectively

classified in a collected edition of 1895-6), to *Wessex Poems*, it is an abiding, perhaps overriding presence.<sup>843</sup> And as *Time's Laughingstocks* demonstrates with such singularity, Hardy's Wessex is not a sentimentalised or idealised 'pastoral'. It is, if anything, an anti-pastoral that insists on the hardships of life on the land. As such, it is a necessary and persuasive corrective to those who, then as now, look to the countryside as an idyllic retreat from the stresses and strains of an urban existence. Yet the fact remains that Hardy's verse is permeated with scenes of country, not city life. His tone may be unsentimental and unsparing, but the settings and subject matter of his poems suggest a powerful concern for a fast disappearing way of life rooted in the land.

My point is a simple one. Hardy accepts change, and in his own life, took full advantage of it. But he nonetheless feels that something has been lost by it, and in his prose and poetry, he restlessly returns to and reworks the same scenes, the same subjects, the same stories: there is something of this feeling in Vita Sackville-West's response to his final collection, which she greeted with the remark that 'bastards are still born and furtively disposed of; lovers still fail to coincide; the old romance is still evoked and regretted'.<sup>844</sup> And this alone should prompt us to wonder what it was that gave rise to Hardy's concern.

The focus of it seems to be what Hardy called 'the evils of instability' (*LW*, p.337), a 'growing dis-association with localities' brought about by the mass migration from country to city; in Hardy's view, this was by its very nature a 'complete reversal of the

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<sup>843</sup> See Purdy, pp.58 & 279.

<sup>844</sup> Quoted in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Armstrong, p.14.

old condition of things'.<sup>845</sup> A 'vast mass of unwritten folk-lore, local chronicle, local topography, and nomenclature', he wrote, 'is absolutely sinking, has nearly sunk, into eternal oblivion' (*LW*, p.336).

I cannot recall a single instance of a labourer who still lives on the farm where he was born, and I can only recall a few who have been five years on their present farms. Thus you see, there being no continuity of environment in their lives, there is no continuity of information, the names, stories, and relics of one place being speedily forgotten under the incoming facts of the next. (*LW*, p.336)

Names, stories, relics: these are the reasons why Hardy values Wessex; these are the things in which he set so much store. And it is this sense of a landscape 'enchased and lettered' that explains both its eco-critical significance and its continuing, contemporary relevance.<sup>846</sup> I have already drawn a parallel between Wessex and the modern concept of bioregion, and between the world of Hardy's verse and Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling': both suggest a continuing relationship between people and place, and a constant dialogue between past and present. And, like Heidegger, Hardy insists on the particular and the specific. With its vivid descriptions of 'summer's green wonderwork' or the way a 'slow river-face glasses/ Its green canopy', this is just another of the more striking aspects of Hardy's poetic evocation of Wessex life.<sup>847</sup> But these things are never seen in isolation or as independent: too vivid to be thought of simply as

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<sup>845</sup> Letter to Percy Bunting dated 5 November 1883, *SL*, p.35.

<sup>846</sup> 'On an Invitation to the United States', I.10; see Chapter 5.

<sup>847</sup> 'The Mother Mourns' (CP76), I.3, and 'My Cicely', II.39-40.



background or backdrop, they form an integral part of Hardy's human narratives and that sense of 'the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand' (*LW*, p.120).

The result is a dynamic depiction of Wessex as a living, lived-in entity, diverse and democratic, in which human life is never seen as the only life. And the persistence of Hardy's 'Wessex' as a popular idea suggests that, well over a century after its reinvention, it remains relevant to those who continue to read his work. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, it may be that we have yet to accustom ourselves to a largely urban way of life. This is not, however, an argument for returning to our rural roots. As Heidegger remarked of his reference to a Black Forest farm (quoted in Chapter 1), it 'in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses'.<sup>848</sup> But it does imply that, if our real plight lies in the continuing need to 'search anew for the nature of dwelling', we might do well to seek out the patterns of meaning that Hardy reveals through his depiction of 'Wessex'.<sup>849</sup> As Naess remarked, 'ethics *follow from* how we experience the world'.<sup>850</sup> And whilst this discussion is above all else about seeking and finding reasons to value the environment on which we depend, and whilst there is no question of trying to return to or recreate the rural way of life Hardy described in novels and verse, this process may in itself supply some sense of what it is to live sustainably in the twenty-first century. As Dolin remarked, Hardy's 'life and work show us how, through the power of the imagination, we can connect meaningfully and without nostalgia with *where we are* – with real and virtual landscapes, and local, national and

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<sup>848</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', p.8.

<sup>849</sup> As Heidegger adds, 'as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer';

Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', p.8.

<sup>850</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, p.20.

global histories and memories'.<sup>851</sup> And Dolin's reference to the 'power of the imagination' is itself an important reminder of the extent to which Hardy's verse forms a vital part of that process of appreciation.

### Hardy's Eco-poetic

In drawing together the findings of this thesis, I have so far considered Hardy's verse as one might his novels, his notes, or his letters; I have not differentiated between one mode of writing and another. But Hardy himself held fast to the Romantic belief that in poetry lay a far superior form of expression, that 'in verse was concentrated the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature' (*LW*, p.51). For the eco-critic, the final, most elusive, but perhaps most important aspect of Hardy's verse and verse drama is the extent to which Hardy's choice of medium affects and shapes his message; the extent to which, in fact, the medium becomes the message, and in itself an aspect of the way in which we respond to and realise the significance of the non-human world.

There is, of course, no single reason why poetry was so well suited to the ideas and emotions that Hardy set out to express. It is a medium perfectly designed for short, intense, and often personative pieces, and it allowed Hardy to switch between different speakers and stories and build up a many-layered picture of his thoughts and ideas. It allows Hardy the flexibility to exploit the full potential of language, by providing for a high degree of linguistic inventiveness and compression. It allowed Hardy's imagination free

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<sup>851</sup> Tim Dolin, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Haus Publishing, 2008), p.9.

rein, whilst granting the reader the license to accept his more visionary statements. And it also allowed Hardy to shape and shake up the expectations of his readers, for whom poetry then tended to be a lyrical and highly-refined form of expression.

I have, of course, discussed this last point at length. Perhaps poetry always demands more of the reader, but Hardy's interest in 'dissonances' (*LW*, p.430), and in 'poetic texture rather than poetic veneer' (*LW*, p.323), forces the reader to pause, to pay attention; to read more intently, and, perhaps, to experience more intensely. But the most remarkable aspect of his verse may be the extent to which its impact does not necessarily depend on a high degree of technical sophistication or experimentation. Even a short and simple poem makes it possible for the reader to see things differently. 'An August Midnight' may stand for many others. Its style is simple, its tone is almost conversational, and its meaning could hardly be clearer: that humble insects might know 'Earth-secrets' that the poet does not (l.12). But repacked as prose, it nonetheless loses its hold over the reader. An idea which seems natural and obvious in the context of Hardy's poem seems gauche, even sentimental when set out in bald and prosaic terms. Couched as poetry, however, Hardy's reaction seems as right as it does inevitable.<sup>852</sup> Perhaps there is something in the way the poem's simple rhyme scheme moves the story along. Perhaps it matters that Hardy first evokes a moment of intense solitude and silence, marked out by 'the beat of a clock from a distant floor' (l.2) (a telling, precise, concrete observation). Whatever the reason, there is something in this

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<sup>852</sup> Writ large, the same point holds for *The Dynasts*, and Hardy's concept of the Immanent Will. Reduced to its bare bones and set out for consideration, Hardy's master narrative might well seem insubstantial and sketchy. Built up over three volumes in a densely layered narrative that brings to bear the full resources of a brilliant and innovative writer, its effect is in fact powerful and persuasive, a point that is difficult to make without quoting large sections of the text or simply directing the reader to immerse him or herself in it.

poem – and in the nature of poetry – that enables the great writer to do more with less. As with music, its effect cannot necessarily be rationalized; but then as Hardy remarked, 'there is latent music in the sincere utterance of deep emotion, however expressed' (LW, p.334). And one key to the impact of Hardy's verse may be its self-evident sincerity, its depth of feeling. 'Poetry', he wrote in *The Life*, 'is emotion put into measure' (LW, p.322). Elsewhere, he cites a line from Leslie Stephen: "The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own, and not to exhibit his learning, or his fine taste, or his skill in mimicking the notes of his predecessors" (quoted in LW, p.131). As a poet, the entry adds, Hardy 'adhered pretty closely to this principle' (LW, p.131); and that may be the reason why a simple, short poem like 'An August Midnight' continues to be read and re-read. We respond above all to the warmth of a poem in which a miscellany of fearsome little creatures ('winged, horned, spined', l.12) blunder onto the great man's page, and, entirely unimpressed by his presence, make their own contribution to the poem's narrative arc by rewriting his 'new-penned line' (l.9) with their inky feet.<sup>853</sup> '[T]he glory of poetry', Hardy later wrote, 'lies in its largeness, admitting among its creators men of infinite variety' (LW, p.414); but there is something in Hardy's own largeness of spirit that makes this poem so memorable.

Perhaps there is another, related reason why Hardy's poetry continues to be read and enjoyed as poetry. If through his verse Hardy set out to share his 'ideas and emotions' (LW, p.302) with his readers, he did so at the deliberate expense of setting out a systematic structure of thought. 'I have no philosophy', he remarked in December

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<sup>853</sup> It is also noteworthy that the poem evokes the early memories that Hardy records in *The Life*; of how, for example, Hardy would in hot weather lie 'on a bank of thyme or camomile with the grasshoppers leaping over him' (LW, p.26).

1920, 'only a confused heap of impressions' (LW, p.441). Even *The Dynasts* was advanced 'not as a reasoned system of philosophy, nor as a new philosophy, but as a poem, with the discrepancies that are to be expected in an imaginative work' (LW, p.343). And whilst we should treat Hardy's remarks with a degree of skepticism, his views nonetheless align with recent attempts to define what might be meant by an 'eco-poetic'. As Bate explains at some length, a poem is a *revelation* of dwelling, rather than a narrative.<sup>854</sup> The poet prefers to show, rather than tell or teach; as Hardy wrote, 'the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions' (LW, p.408). And if in consequence Hardy's poetry demands more of the reader – if it requires a deliberate effort to engage with and understand it – this is true also of what it is to live sustainably, wherever it is we live: through that same deliberate effort to understand, appreciate, and engage.

There is, however, a final, important consideration, a final reason why this thesis is not ultimately about Hardy as a thinker, but about Hardy as a poet. Hardy was, as I have suggested, influenced by but determined to set himself apart from the Romantics whose legacy stretched such a long shadow over Victorian verse. But Hardy did nothing to conceal his admiration for those who like Shelley saw in poetry the supreme value of the imagination. Indeed Hardy, who distanced himself from the Romantics in many of his poems, nonetheless tended to see himself as a kind of 'learned seer' ('So Various', CP855, l.26), different in degree but not in kind from Shelley's vision of poets as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.<sup>855</sup> Those who, like Davie, believe

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<sup>854</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p.266.

<sup>855</sup> In *The Life*, Hardy cannot resist quoting 'a correspondent in the Philippine Islands' who likened him to 'some terrible old prophet crying in the wilderness'; this is the only line of the letter Hardy quotes (LW,

that Hardy sold short the poetic vocation through the disabling modesty of his aims underrate the ambition of *The Dynasts* or overlook those remarkable but slight poems in which Hardy voices rook or starling or game-bird, or imagines the thoughts of a caged thrush when, 'freed and home again', it declares 'Men know but little more than we!'<sup>856</sup> And if Hardy's verse and verse-drama does constitute a kind of eco-poetic – a challenge to the anthropocentrism of our views and an invitation to see the environment as we form part of it – then the remarkable audacity of his imagination lies at the heart of it.

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p.353). Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Wu, p.969; 'poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination"' (p.956); Shelley's essay was published in 1840, the year of Hardy's birth.

<sup>856</sup> I have paraphrased Davie, *Thomas Hardy*, and specifically p.40 and p.36; see also p.11-12. 'The Caged Thrush Freed and Home Again', l.12.

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