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Catherine Lanone

1 Published in 1986 by Richard Dawkins, an Oxford scientist, *The Blind Watchmaker* upholds Darwinism against the religious fundamentalism challenging in the United States the concept of evolution: "Natural selection is the blind watchmaker, blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view" (Dawkins 21). The ongoing debate is familiar; Dawkins addresses the problem of "the illusion of design", produced by the blind, unconscious, automatic process of selection: "the living results of natural selection overwhelmingly impress us with the appearance of design as if by a master watchmaker, impress us with the illusion of design and planning" (Dawkins 21). But Dawkins' book strikes a chord, since he chooses as his central paradigm a powerful metaphor which he borrows from the eighteenth-century theologian William Paley, and then twists and appropriates. In *Natural Theology—or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearance of Nature,* Paley exposed in 1802 his proof of the existence of God, with the "Argument from Design". Should one find a stone on the heath, Paley argues, one would not be surprised; but if one were to find a watch, one would have to infer the existence of its maker, and conclude

> that the watch must have a maker: that there must have existed, at some time, in some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use. (Paley in Dawkins, 4)

2 Paley claims that the manifestations of design in nature—and thereby in human beings—exceed the simple mechanism of a watch, as he studies the complex machinery of life, comparing, for instance, the eye with a telescope. But Dawkins, a hundred and eighty years later, recalls that appearances are deceptive, and hammers home the Darwinian precepts:

> All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind's eye. Natural selection [...] has no purpose in mind. [...] It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker. (Dawkins 5)

3 Dawkins articulates here the paradox which Victorians found so baffling, so bitterly bleak, as Nature, in spite of all its wondrous subtleties, was stripped of its benevolent presence, became the result of a slow, indifferent process, of gradual and cumulative selection. This may highlight one of the crucial contradictions of Hardy's work, *i.e.* the tension between the tragic pattern at work in novels like *Jude* and *Tess* (which implies that events are determined by Fate, a sense of destiny personified for instance by the "President of the Immortals" playing with Tess until she is hanged), and the opposite notion that everything relies on absurd coincidences, on mere chance, on a tremendous power operating unconsciously. Beyond Schopenhauer's "Immanent will", Hardy's philosophy is strongly influenced by Darwinism. If Darwin, as Dawkins shows, does not believe in design, Hardy cannot quite give up the sense of a significant pattern, but he does retain the point of evolution, convinced as he is that this pattern is indifferent to individual desires, destiny or even survival. Indeed, Hardy's work articulates in many ways that bewildering sense of a blind watchmaker, of a complex system of shifting causes and consequences producing baffling complex patterns, begetting and thwarting the desires and longings of individuals, thereby creating lives which seem teleological but turn out to be random and purposeless, where the unfit must always be doomed. One of Hardy's own models for the blind watchmaker, for the complex cogs of the machinery of life, is the figure of the mechanical bird, used as a syncretic figure both of some kind of tragic design at work and of heedless Darwinian evolution.

4 Birds loom large in Hardy's world, and their function as conventional symbols may at first sight seem a far cry from contemporary science. Hardy often relies on a protagonist's empathy with the plight of birds to arouse an emotional response in the reader; Jude, for instance, loses his job as a boy and gets beaten because he lets the birds eat the seeds instead of preventing them from doing so; when wandering towards Flintcomb Ash, Tess makes a nest for herself in the leaves, only to discover that she is surrounded by dying pheasants, so that she finds herself forced to wring their necks to put an end to their suffering. Playing on pathos, the text stresses the cruelty of hunters, who breed pheasants in order to shoot them:

> [...] they ran amuck, and made it their purpose to destroy life—in this case harmless feathered creatures brought into being by artificial means solely to gratify these propensities [...]. she exclaimed, her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly [...] I am not mangled, and I am not bleeding [...] (Hardy 1998, 279)

5 Tess may not be outwardly mangled[1], but the episode functions as a kind of objective correlative for her inner wounds, as she has been tricked by Alec and abandoned by her beloved Angel. As she mourns for the dying birds she is killing for pity's sake (note her tears as she kills them "tenderly"), her words recall a poem entitled *The Puzzled Game Birds*, a title which plays on the polysemic "game" to highlight the absurd reversal, as the baffled birds voice their anguish:

> They are not those who used to feed us
> When we were young—they cannot be—
> These shapes that now bereave and bleed us? (135)

6 Both Tess and Jude are connected with birds as emblems of fragile natural life, doomed by ruthless human intervention. But beyond pathos, Hardy's depiction of birds is also heavily influenced by Darwinian science, which destroys empathy between man and nature. The bird is a significant emblem used to pinpoint the shift from Romantic Nature—a Wordsworthian, benevolent field of immanence—to the bleak empty machinery of a cold post-Darwinian world.

7 The fossil bird of *In a Museum* may be taken as the relic, not so much of a prehistoric bird, as of romantic poetry and Platonic beliefs. Hardy thus articulates poetry and contemporary science, drawing inspiration from a visit he made to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in June 1915, where he saw the cast of an Archaeopteryx, found in Upper Jurassic Stone in Bavaria (Bailey 345). The cast is the key to the poem, where the song of the bird, rather than the bird itself, is revived in the poet's mind. The bird is immediately identified, not by the complex scientific term (archaeopteryx) but by the quality of a song which is necessarily absent yet conveyed by the alliteration in "m" and "l": "Here's the mould of a musical bird long passed from light". Hardy does not try to imagine the bird, which flew before man (Hardy uses the unusual verb "winging" to stress this sense of primeval anteriority: "Which over the earth before man was winging"). Instead of the kind of reconstruction drawn by naturalists, seeking to imagine the appearance of the prehistoric species, Hardy turns the petrified bird into some kind of pure sound, which blends with the concert he has heard on the previous night, in an everlasting series of echoes:

> Such a dream is Time that the coo of this ancient bird
> Has perished not, but is blent, or will be blending
> Mid visionless wilds of space with the voice I heard
> In the full-fugued song of the universe unending. (Hardy 1994, 404)

8 The "visionless wilds of space" dimly echo the "viewless wings of poesy" and the darkling grove of Keats's Nightingale, and the "full-fugued song" recalls its "full-throated ease" (Keats 187-8). The fossil, not the invisible bird, is connected with the essence of a song, a Platonic mutation of stone into a kind of music of the spheres opening onto eternity. Just as the stone keeps the imprint of the bird, the poet has captured the memory of the song, as if the mind were a kind of phonograph, and, in the chaos of creation, the bird offered a synaesthetic sound pattern, a Deleuzean ritournelle.

9 But if, in a rather unexpected shift, the fossil is used as a paradoxical emblem of an eternal song rather than evolution, other poems toll the death of romanticism. Such is the case of Shelley's Skylark. Hardy used to carry a volume by Shelley and read aloud from it when he was an architect. This early fascination for Shelley was soon replaced by what Harold Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1997), an antagonistic impulse to refute Shelley's exhilarating poetic flight. Hardy recalls the way the skylark embodied for Shelley the rapture of pure poetic expression, the boundless "unbodied joy" of the "blithe Spirit" (Shelley 226). But Hardy's poem ironically presents, instead of the immortal spirit of poetry, a very dead bird which has left, instead of the solid printed pattern of a fossil, a handful of dust, or rather, a mere "pinch of unseen, unguarded dust" (Hardy 1994, 92); though Shelley made it immortal, "it only lived like another bird, / And knew not its immortality". The bird which fell and vanished may be lying anywhere, ecstasy remains a mere figure of speech, subjective self-delusion rather than a true epiphany, while the eternity of the bird is exposed as a fairy tale, in

an ironic stanza recalling some kind of Victorian fairy painting, by John Anster Fitzgerald for instance:

> Go find it, faeries, go and find
> That tiny pinch of priceless dust
> And bring a casket silver-lined
> And framed of gold that gems encrust;
> And we will lay it safe therein
> And consecrate it to endless time;
> For it inspired a bard to win
> Ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme. (Hardy 1994, 92)

10 The shift is even more obvious in *The Darkling Thrush*. Chosen as the emblem of a new era, the thrush is no nightingale or skylark, but a mere commonplace bird which is meant *not* to impress the reader, dwindling as it does into a definitely unromantic, unattractive "aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small" (Hardy 1994, 134). Its joyful song triggers doubt in the listener rather than enthralling ecstasy, as the "full-throated ease" is replaced by a "full-hearted evensong". The bird no longer connotes absolute flight, it is "terrestrial", an adjective which according to Kenkichi Kamijima recalls both Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. A "terrestrial bird", deprived of the wings of epiphany, the poet must like the thrush "fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom", gazing at the landscape which is turning into the century's corpse. The distance which separated Keats from his nightingale has increased as the melancholy poet gazes at a bird which seems to know the secret of a joy he himself fails to be aware of. Read by the light of *The Darkling Thrush*, *In a Museum* thus becomes the mausoleum of dissolved romanticism, with its fossil standing as an empty shape beckoning amongst poems and novels dealing with loss and displacement.

11 The Darwinian twist mocks the Romantic vision of the emblematic bird's eternal song, a transcendental presence connecting the poet with the higher forces of inspiration. Instead of timeless transcendence, the bird is made to embody the passing of time and the constant process of biological transformation. In Hardy's grim world, birds, like everything else, are very much subjected to transience. They belong to the cycle of life and death, winter and spring, even at Talbothays, in the pastoral haven of spring where Tess and Angel's romance begins:

> The season developed and matured. Another year's instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles. (Tess 1998, 128)

12 The process of organic mutations dissolves individual existence, stressing the miracle of creation but also the brevity of life and the ruthless transformations of mere matter, a theme which recurs almost word for word in *Proud Songsters* published in *Winter Words*, 1928. The birds singing in the first stanza "as if all Time were theirs" are undone by a series of negations in the second stanza:

> There are brand-new birds of twelve-months' growing
> Which a year ago, or less than twain
> No finches were, nor nightingales,
> Nor thrushes,
> But only particles of grain,
> And earth, and air, and rain. (Hardy 1994, 797)

13 For all its apparent stress on musicality (and it is no wonder that the poem should have been set to music by several composers, including Benjamin Britten) there is something

ominous in the way the chemistry of existence distributes matter, breeding life for a brief lapse of time. Instead of being a symbol of eternity, the bird dwindles into a symptom of the cycle of life and death, as in *The Selfsame Song*, where the song only *seems* to endure:

> —But it's not the selfsame bird.—
> No: perished to dust is he.
> As also are those who heard
> That song with me. (Hardy 1994, 797)

14 The dots carve the gap of absence, of both birds and men. No wonder that the loss of faith should, in *The Impercipient*, be compared to a broken bird:

> O, doth a bird deprived of wings
> Go earth-bound wilfully! (Hardy 1994, 60)

15 Darwinism has clipped the wings both of the poet and of the bird symbolizing poetic inspiration.

16 Hardy takes this organic imagery a step further by shifting from the pure song of birds, from the pattern of life and death, to a more original evocation of the cogs of Nature. The shift from the Romantic bird (connoting the connection with Nature's transcendental presence) to the mechanical bird (connoting the blindness of a design which favours evolution but ignores man) stresses the legacy of Darwinism. Mechanical images pepper the poems, as when the swallows *of Overlooking the River Stour* become "little cross-bows animate" (Hardy 1994, 452), "[p]laning up shavings of crystal spray" (453), while the stanzas'echoing pattern mimics the eight shaped by the birds'flight. The tension between the necessity for design and the awareness of blind biological processes at work is most perceptible in novels like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where birds become mere cogs and Nature an artificial music box. Thus a "solitary cracked-voiced reed-sparrow" greets Tess in a "sad, machine-made tone" at Talbothays (Hardy 1998, 136), while the oxymoronic "luminous gloom" may connote both the yearning for a transcendent (albeit tragic) design and the darker, materialistic randomness of Darwinian evolution. The magical spectral hours which transmute Tess and Angel in the early morning light into ethereal, evanescent creatures are belied by the "great bold noise" of herons "moving their heads round in a slow, horizontal, passionless wheel, like the turn of puppets by clockwork" (Hardy 1998, 131). Mutating relics of Romanticism, the birds expose a flawed human gaze. Through the implicit analogy with bird migration, the seasonal migrations of Tess—as she moves from Talbothays to Marlott to Flintcomb Ash, from a green and pleasant land to harsh winter surroundings —must be grasped within the wider context of natural demands and biological processes of survival, or, to use Gillian Beer's analysis of *The Return of the Native*: "*Migration* in this work represents the only resilient form of escape and survival: moving seasonally to keep in temper with a supportive environment" (Beer 47).

17 Indeed, when bird imagery reappears with striking force at Flintcomb Ash, Hardy picks up the significant but surprising associations he had used earlier (in *The Return of the Native*) between British birds and the Arctic. In *Open Fields,* Gillian Beer has commented on the way the figure of migrating birds fuses the near and far in the novel: while "Egdon is as unchanging as the Arctic, a basic and ultimate natural world which ignores and outscales humankind", the bird is portrayed as a "creature of multiple homelands, returning as a native to our land, received as a native at the other end of the world as well" (Beer 45). Hardy begins by describing an ordinary duck or mallard, but quickly

turns the familiar bird into a symptom of English hubris, as it brings a knowledge of "[g]lacial catastrophes, snow-storm episodes, glittering auroral effects, Polaris in the zenith, Franklin underfoot" (Hardy 1990, 84). The mention of "Franklin underfoot" recalls the fateful disaster of the 1845 Franklin expedition, while in Hardy's use of "auroral" rather than "aurora" we may perhaps hear the disturbing trace of "oral" or "orality", a haunting echo of the Inuit tales reported by John Rae, which shattered English self-righteousness and cast a dark light on Franklin and his gallant crew[2]. The vertical Imperial model, placing the English hero as the ruler of the hostile forces of Nature embodied by the Arctic, is shattered by hints of disaster and replaced by the model of social evolution (seasonal migration) and by a flattened perspective which dwarfs human characters, as the scale of Darwinian evolution reduces them to immaterial, insignificant pinpoints. Indeed, when in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the reader is given a similar description of Northern birds with eyes full of unspeakable horrors, the flat perspective dwarfs the women pitted against the hostile background of snowy fields, their eyes receding into their skulls, perhaps recalling the skeletons of lost Arctic explorers. Instead of a line of flight, the birds introduce a line of death, in this bleak and barren landscape where the livid face of the sky meets the brown face of the earth, almost crushing the women who work in the fields. The two women have become empty subjects, blanks, little more than productive automatons. In this semiotic system, winter is not simply the antithesis of spring at Talbothays, exacting hard labour and female exploitation. Hardy also uses Arctic imagery to counter Victorian stereotypes and expose so-called natural qualities like purity and virginity—Angel calls Tess a "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" (Hardy 1984, 116)—as social constructs, as if the bleak, Darwinian discourse of evolution were also liberating, dispelling the myth of pastoral essences. Tess is abandoned by Angel because she cannot conform to the model of purity he abides by, as the subtitle of the novel suggests. Hardy subtly connects the myth of pure femininity with the recollection of Arctic expeditions, blending imperial mythical constructs seeking to conquer the wide regions of pristine ice, the sublime test of English supremacy, and male domination at home. It is the very concept of whiteness, of purity, of virgin women and virgin territories, which is challenged by the novel, tying together sexual prejudices and vain imperial quests. Emotionally starved by Angel's departure, Tess is sentenced to hard labour in this "achromatic chaos of things" (Hardy 1998, 289), as the snow brings a scent of doom, "[t]he blast smelt of icebergs, arctic seas, whales, and white bears, carrying the snow so that it licked the land but did not deepen on it" (289). The iceberg motif, here, paves the way for one of Hardy's most famous poems, which encapsulates the mechanical isotopy transposing the Darwinian legacy.

18 It is no wonder that the story of the Titanic should have fascinated Hardy, as a case in point pitting the hubris of man against the indifference of Nature. Hardy pays lip service to the Titanic as "a giant created by man as a challenge to Nature", to borrow Margaret Atwood's expression (Atwood 58). The poem's images are derived in part from the photographs which were taken and widely circulated by the press at the time; the famous mirrors, the steel doors protecting the fires, the incredible amount of planning, the time it took to build, fashion and "grow" the ship, "this creature of cleaving wing" (Hardy 1994, 289), like a mechanical bird, as it were, all the hubris of science are opposed, not so much to the momentous encounter with the iceberg, the conflagration which sinks the ship or consumes two hemispheres, but to the slow, parallel creation of the iceberg

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too. (Hardy 1994, 289)

19 Hardy is here giving us his own version of the "Blind Watchmaker", with its uncanny powers of creation, a Schopenhaurean Immanent Will which can fashion the perfect design which will meet the wondrous ship at the perfect moment in order to sink it. Like the blind worm crawling upon the underwater mirrors, the powers of creation may produce the perfect design to defeat the hubris of human science, but in Darwinian fashion the design remains blind, no longer the cathartic impulse of tragedy.

20 Thus, the fascination for fossils and evolution gives way to a cold vision of an absurd, mechanical world, leading from the virgin territories of the Arctic, turned into a place of monstrous regression, to the archetypal shape of ice defeating the unsinkable ship. The Schopenhaurean conception of catastrophe also descends from the shock of evolution, the scientific discourse of "untamed chance", "pure, naked chance" (Dawkins 317). The discourse of scientific progress replaces Providence with a blind, ironic design, foreshadowing perhaps the ultimate collapse of words and science in the impending slaughter of World War One.

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NOTES

1. Hardy constantly revised his novels, and in another version of the text, Tess actually says "I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding" (*Tess* 1984, 270). The use of the modal "be", which is closer to dialect, adds a touch of local colour, but also enhances the metaphoric, ontological quality of the scene. The maimed pheasants are the counterpart of the hens spoilt and worshipped by Alec's mother, a signifier of social imposture.
2. In 1845, the Erebus and Terror—two ships which were fitted with the latest technological appliances such as steam engines, and containing enough food cans for three years—left to conquer the Northwest Passage, yet Franklin and his gallant crew were never seen again. Lady Franklin and the Admiralty launched a series of rescue expeditions, but they were looking for Franklin in the wrong place. In 1854, John Rae, a Scottish Doctor surveying Boothia peninsula for the Hudson's Bay Company, found by chance the first relics of the lost expedition, which had been trapped by ice on King William's Island; Rae also gathered unsettling Inuit oral reports, reports which accused the English of cannibalism after having abandoned ship. The news was greeted by disbelief and indignation in Britain, and challenged by public figures like Lady Franklin or Charles Dickens.

ABSTRACTS

Gillian Beer has shown that the Darwinian plot radically changed the way the world was perceived, hence the way literature was written. Symbols and metaphors are used to convey complex issues such as the mutations brought by science, radical changes which were so hard to grasp. Thus, many of Thomas Hardy's images and metaphors, whether in his poems or his novels, can only be understood if one bears in mind the impact of Darwinism upon the Victorian frame of mind. This paper focuses on the way two key images (Hardy's vision of mechanical birds and ominous icebergs as cogs of destiny) may be highlighted by today's readings of the Darwinian legacy, such as Richard Dawkins' 1986 *The Blind Watchmaker:* both may be read as symptoms of an ontological paradigmatic shift, as Thomas Hardy grappled with the philosophical contradictions of a new era.

Gillian Beer a mis en évidence l'impact de Darwin sur la littérature victorienne, comme si l'évolution s'était substituée à l'intrigue traditionnelle du roman. Métaphores et symboles permettent de rendre compte des mutations idéologiques issues des bouleversements

scientifiques. Tel est bien le cas pour Thomas Hardy, dont l'œuvre porte l'empreinte des interrogations scientifiques et épistémologiques de son époque. Cet article s'inspire de la lecture que fait Richard Dawkins du Darwinisme, et notamment du concept de l'horloger aveugle, pour interroger, à travers quelques poèmes et *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, deux images clefs de Hardy, l'oiseau mécanique et l'iceberg, et la façon dont le motif des rouages de la destinée révèle une mutation conceptuelle paradigmatique.

INDEX

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