

## **“The Essence of Individuality”** Hardy, the Regional Novel and the Romantic Legacy

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**Abstract** If there is a literary genre which can stand as a symbol for the Victorian Age, this is the provincial novel. Just when faster means of transport were making it possible to reach even the remotest places in Britain, and the industrial revolution was making of the modern towns the very centre of human life, many novelists established themselves on the literary scene by focusing on peripheral, remote and often backward provincial regions. This seeming paradox is all the more striking if we consider that one of the most outstanding authors of Victorian provincial literature was Thomas Hardy, one who carried this concentration on localities to extremes. Indeed Hardy's *Wessex* proves to be made up of microcosms, each asserting its own peculiarities. Yet, at the same time, Hardy also distanced himself from other provincial novelists by overtly claiming that concentrating on Wessex – that tiny corner of England – did not actually involve missing universal truths. The paper investigates into this seeming paradox, focusing on Hardy's debt to the Romantic legacy of Walter Scott and William Wordsworth on the one hand, and on the parallelism between his method and the method of the rising science of anthropology on the other hand.

**Summary** 1 Wessex, the Last Region. – 2 Wordsworth's Long Shadow. – 3 The Consequences of 'Beach-pebble Attrition'.

**Keywords** Thomas Hardy. Regional novel. Romanticism. Walter Scott. William Wordsworth.

### **1 Wessex, the Last Region**

In no other Victorian novelist more than in Thomas Hardy did the feeling that differences between counties were fading trigger the reaction that it was necessary to preserve what was disappearing before it was too late. Hardy felt the urgency of fixing on the page the peculiarities of the counties of the South West of England, in particular the traditional ways of living and the uniqueness of its inhabitants. Whatever Hardy wrote in prose is set in Wessex, a region coinciding more or less with that area. Even when he decided to write poetry, Hardy did not dismiss Wessex, and his first collection of poems was entitled *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (1898).

Hardy was certainly in the right position to become the regional novelist *par excellence*. Born in Higher Bockhampton, three miles from Dorchester, he spent all his life in Dorchester, excepting some years in London when he was trying to make his way in literature while also working as

an architect. He was therefore a native and a product of Dorset, who intimately knew the traditions, the language and the stories of the local people. But at the same time he was an outsider as for education, profession, and experience (cf. Keith 1979, 39-40). Hardy portrayed this sense of irretrievable loss and of the impossibility of return in many of his characters, most notably Clym Yeobright and Grace Melbury, natives whose identities are defined by their places of origin but whose cosmopolitan experiences have somehow denatured them. Yet Hardy was an outsider not only in his own native place, but also – and especially – in London and in the panorama of Victorian literature.

In this essay I will argue that the peculiarity of Hardy's regionalism is due to the fact that on the one hand he practiced a sort of early nineteenth-century regionalism, and on the other he undermined the very assumptions Romantic regionalism was founded upon. Firstly, I will illustrate how Hardy's regionalism has its origin in Romanticism, in particular in a line traced by Wordsworth and Scott; secondly, I will argue that Hardy, while adopting and elaborating the main contributions offered by Romanticism, subverted the regional novel from within, so that his novels represent both the highest point reached by regional literature and, at the same time, the beginning of its end. I will concentrate mainly on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, because this is the novel where both the influence of Romanticism and its rejection by Hardy are clearly visible. As we will see, Hardy's regionalism contains in itself the seeds of its own disruption, as much as his Wessex is threatened from within, rather than from a generic modernity coming from without.

## 2 Wordsworth's Long Shadow

Hardy wrote the *Wessex Novels*, a cycle of fourteen regional novels, at the end of the century that had seen the birth of the regional novel and its developing into the provincial novel of George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, although the two genres often tended to merge, making a clear-cut distinction ineffective. Critics (cf. Duncan 2002, Pite 2002) have observed that Hardy's novels share many features characterising the regional literature that had flourished at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in particular the claim that regions entertain with the nation a synecdochical relationship and the precise and realistic portrayal of rural settings. However, the label of 'regional novelist' is too restrictive for the author of both *Under the Greenwood Tree* – which is rather a provincial novel, with its subtitle ("A Rural Painting of the Dutch School") evoking Chapter 17 of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* – and of *Jude the Obscure*, where rural localities are as bleak as town suburbs. Indeed Hardy's eccentricity (and modernity, after all) in the panorama of Victorian literature is due to the peculiar use he

made of the Romantic legacy left by Scott and Wordsworth.

In order to understand how Hardy's regionalism was influenced by Romanticism, we have to bear in mind the two main features of provincial literature, that is to say the genre that, together with the sensation novel, was most in vogue when Hardy began writing. Unlike the region, in general the province is, in Duncan's words, "defined more simply by its *difference from the metropolis*" (2002, 322, emphasis in the original). Moreover, in provincial novels locality does not play such an essential role. For instance, in George Eliot's great provincial novels "a setting is given near the beginning of her novels and then its geographical position is allowed to slip into the background as events unfold within a single community, whose structure, tensions and changes epitomize those beyond" (Pite 2002, 70). While regional novelists deemed regions as a sort of small-scale reproductions of the nation and therefore allowed them to explore wider issues, provincial novelists tended to see provinces as surviving enclaves of traditional ways of living in opposition to alienating urban areas. Although some of Hardy's novels might suggest an idea of Wessex as a pastoral idyll, for example the already mentioned *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (the titles themselves reinforcing this impression), such novels as *A Laodicean* and *Jude the Obscure* work in the opposite direction, with the result that in the end Wessex appears as a complex system where modernity cohabits with relics - archaeological as well as sociological - of an archaic past. As each novel, excepting *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, is set in an extremely confined portion of the South West of England, the result is that the multi-faceted character of Hardy's Wessex can be appreciated only by considering the cycle in its entirety. It could be said, therefore, that Wessex, with its internal differences and complexity, stands for England (and even for Europe, as we will see), where rural areas live side by side with industrial towns. Indeed Hardy was particularly interested in the South West of England (above all Dorset) not only because that was his native region, but because he deemed it a perfect clinical case, the best place where the effects of the advent of modernity could be studied from close-up.

Hardy's firm belief that in Wessex one could observe the dynamics and the consequences of radical changes at work was founded on the assumption that progress does not irradiate from urbanised areas into peripheral rural districts in a homogeneous and smooth way. This is particularly evident in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where the narrator comments on the differences between two villages (Marlott, Tess's native village, and Trantridge, where her supposed relatives live) which lie at no great distance from each other: "Even the character and accent of the two peoples had shades of difference, despite the amalgamating effects of a roundabout railway; so that, though less than twenty miles from the place of her sojourn at Trantridge, her native village had seemed a far-

away spot" (Dolin & Higonet 2003, 75).

This is obviously the concept of 'uneven development', or of 'the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous',<sup>1</sup> which had been widely explored by Walter Scott (cf. Chandler 1998, 131-5) a long time before historians investigated the phenomenon. At the end of *Waverley*, Scott thus explained his choice of setting his novel in 1745 Scotland:

There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. [...] The gradual influx of wealth, and the extension of commerce, have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers, as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time. (Lamont 1998, 340)

Scotland before the definitive defeat of the Jacobite party in 1745 is worth dwelling upon because it represents what Europe was like in the Ancien Régime, that is before the advent of modernity. Scott insists on the fact that Scotland was 'primitive' not only from a geographical point of view, but also from the point of view of "manners and customs" (340). Here Scott implies that Scotland's 'uneven development' is an interesting object of study because it enables us to better understand the transformations undergone by England over more than two centuries. But the reference to Europe implies also that Scott's perspective was not limited to the United Kingdom, and that he considered Scotland as a case-study in the European context. Unlike Orientalist writers, Scott believed that it was not necessary to go outside the national boundaries to find pockets of backwardness.

Hardy made a statement similar to Scott's in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where Tess and her mother exemplify Wessex's 'uneven development':

Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (Dolin & Higonet 2003, 23)

This comment by the narrator echoes Scott's statement (cf. Villari 1990, 51-3). Joan and Tess Durbeyfield, though mother and daughter, belong to two distant epochs because a time span of two centuries has been condensed into a few years. This radical transformation, however, is far from

<sup>1</sup> The expression *Ungleichzeitigkeit* was first used by the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder (1926, 11), but it was Ernst Bloch who theorised the concept of 'non-simultaneity' (cf. Bloch 1962, 104-60).

being confined to Wessex, let alone to Marlott. Tess's belonging to a later age is due to her "trained National teachings" and to the "Standard knowledge" made possible by the introduction of the Revised Code in 1862. Hardy's reference to this national reform suggests that Tess and her mother illustrate a change that had national origins and therefore was affecting the whole nation, including its remotest areas. Tess and Joan stand not only for thousands of other mothers and daughters separated by standard education, but also for two different ages of British history, the Jacobean and the Victorian. The juxtaposition of Tess and her mother makes the suddenness of the change, its extent and its effects plainly visible, just as Scotland condensed and illustrated two hundred years of human progress.

Hence we can say that Wessex and the microcosms it is made of are Hardy's clinical case(s), as much as Scotland is for Scott the region where changes from archaic to modern ways of living can be observed from close-up. The fact that both Scott and Hardy refer to Europe to justify their choice of concentrating on a locality implies that their concern was understanding what was happening (and had happened) in larger Europe by studying a small and remote part of it. Although Hardy has often been criticised for his almost excessive concentration of Wessex, his frequent allusions to Europe and to the universal character of the region where he set his novels suggest that the question of the relationship between the regions and the nation, the particular and the universal, was dear to him. Hardy overtly wrote his own vindication of his method and choices in what is considered as his most significant declaration of poetics, that is to say the 1912 "General Preface" to the *Wessex Edition of the Novels and Poems*, where he stated:

I considered that our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature found sufficient room for a large proportion of its action in an extent of their country not too much larger than the half-dozen counties here reunited under the old name of Wessex, that the domestic emotions have throbbled in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and that, anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose. (Orel 1967, 45)

This could be considered the manifesto of Hardy's regional novel. Hardy's choice of Wessex is justified by the fact that in that area, bigger than Attica but still rather limited in space, a writer can find sufficient material for his study of man's emotions and human relationships.

So Wessex can stand for England and even for Europe as a whole because human emotions there are no different from those felt in the "palaces of Europe", which became the setting of *The Dynasts*, an ambitious drama in verse in three parts about the Napoleonic wars (1904, 1906 and 1908). However, it is important to point out that even in *The Dynasts*

Wessex plays a crucial role. Although *The Dynasts* dramatises 'great' historical events which affected the major European countries, Wessex acts as a counterpart to the events taking place on the battlefields and in the "palaces of Europe". Yet Hardy went as far as to say that Europe itself is in the end a microcosm if one observes it from an aerial perspective, which is exactly what he did in *The Dynasts* through the point of view of the "Phantom Intelligences". In the "General Preface" to the *Wessex Edition* Hardy wrote that "by surveying Europe from a celestial point of vision - as in *The Dynasts* - that continent becomes virtually a province - a Wessex, an Attica, even a mere garden" (Orel 1967, 48).

By preferring the close-up observation of a regional microcosm which stands for a nation or even for a continent, Hardy exerted what he called "the art of observation" which, in his own words, "consists in [...] the seeing of great things in little things, the whole in the part" (Millgate 1989, 262). Now, both Hardy's (and Scott's) firm belief that greater issues can be better understood by studying small communities had its origin in Romanticism, and more precisely in a poet contemporary of Scott. In the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800), Wordsworth, beside defending his and Coleridge's choice of giving voice to common people using their very language, wrote:

The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature [...]. Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended; and are more durable [...]. (Brett & Jones 1991, 289-90)

Wordsworth claims here that passions in rustic people are not only more visible and more freely expressed, but that they "attain their maturity", that is they are fully expressed. Their feelings are "elementary" and simpler (if compared to urbanised people's), and the reason why they are worth being focused on and studied is that "elementary feelings" determine more durable manners. Humble people, in other words, cannot show affectation, nor feign, and their acts are consistent with their emotions.

In a passage at the beginning of *The Woodlanders*, Hardy explicitly explained why close communities are easier to study and underlined what we can learn about man from the observation of human dramas in such a

remote place as Little Hintock:

It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premisses, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, no less than in other places, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein. (Ingham 1998, 8)

As in the passage from the *Life* about “the art of observation”, Hardy here insists on the reason why isolated rural communities are as worth observing and representing as complex societies. If seclusion, on the one hand, constitutes a barrier between the inhabitants of Little Hintock and the world, on the other hand it forces the members of the community to live in close contact with each other. This forced cohabitation, combined with unrestrained passions, gives birth to dramas of such an intensity that the real nature of human beings and their relationships become more clearly visible.

Hence both Scott and Hardy learned from Wordsworth that in a restricted and out-of-the-way region observation of the elementary laws of progress is made easier. Indeed human beings living in a remote and rural environment have a simpler personality and, as a consequence, observation of human nature there is made easier too. A declaration surprisingly similar to Wordsworth's is to be found in a novelist who was born in the same year as Hardy, the Italian Giovanni Verga, who wrote in his preface to *I Malavoglia*:

Il movente dell'attività umana che produce la fiamma del progresso è preso qui alle sue sorgenti, nelle produzioni più modeste e materiali. Il meccanismo delle passioni che la determinano in quelle basse sfere è meno complicato, e potrà quindi osservarsi con maggior precisione. (Simioni 1979, 51)

Verga's statement is interesting because, much in the same way as his contemporary Thomas Hardy, he combines Wordsworth's belief that human passions can be better understood if observed in humble people with Scott's awareness that the dynamics of social changes are more apparent if observed in peripheral and backwards areas (Scott's Scotland, Hardy's Wessex, and Verga's Sicily).<sup>2</sup> The early nineteenth-century Romantic Wordsworth and Scott and the late nineteenth-century 'naturalist' Hardy and Verga shared,

2 For the larger implications of this special line of development of the Romantic legacy, cf. Villari 2015.

together with anthropologists, the firm belief that the observation of ways of life, behaviours and customs in rural communities – or even in exotic ethnic groups, as in the case of anthropology – can shed light on urban societies, where the superimpositions of culture often tend to make the study of human nature more difficult, being the point “where culture separates itself from nature” (Duncan 2010, 62) concealed under artificial manners and the “emphatic language” Wordsworth speaks of.

Finally, the main influence Wordsworth exerted on Hardy’s special regionalism regards the relationship between human beings and nature. At the end of the passage of the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” above cited, Wordsworth says that the last reason why he decided to give voice to rustic people was that in rural communities “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (Brett & Jones 1991, 290). Man and environment form an indissoluble whole, making the study of nature inseparable from the study of human nature, and vice versa. In Hardy the theme of the union of man and landscape found its most wholehearted interpreter. First of all, it is locality – i.e. Wessex – that gives the name to the collection of his novels. Secondly, one of the three categories into which he divided his novels in 1912 is “Novels of Character and Environment” (Orel 1967, 44-5). The choice of the title of this group, to which all the major novels by Hardy belong, is fundamental. In the first place, “Novels of Character and Environment” implies that in these novels man and place are put on the same level and are given the same importance. Secondly, in these novels the main characters *are* their environment, and vice versa. This means that people are more or less like plants, which grow only in their habitat and cannot be rooted out of it without serious consequences.<sup>3</sup> One of the most wholehearted statements of the perfect communion between men (in this case, women) and place can be found in *Tess*, when the narrator describes the labourers employed in the harvest in Blackmoor Vale:

But those of the other sex were the most interesting of this company of

<sup>3</sup> The equation between human beings and plants well suits the close relationship between men and their environment in Hardy’s novels. Desmond Hawkins wrote that “Hardy’s characters seem to grow up out of the land as naturally as its plants and trees” (1984, 82) and Michael Millgate (1971) stated about *The Woodlanders* that there Hardy represented a small group of characters different as to birth, class, education and wealth and divided them into two groups, the woodlanders and the ex-urbanities. Then he inflicted on them “a wide range of misfortunes which nature, society, sexual drive, human folly, and simple accident can bring. Working with the established human ecology – men and women trained by the inheritance of generations to live in these particular circumstances – Hardy transplants exotic growths (Mrs Charmond and Fitzpiers) from elsewhere. He also takes one promising plant (Grace Melbury) from its natural soil, forces it in hothouse conditions, and then transplants it back to its place of origin” (1971, 250).

binders, by reason of the charm which is acquired by woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature, and is not merely an object set down therein as at ordinary times. A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it. (Dolin & Higonnet 2003, 87-8)

Women in their 'habitat', that is to say the land, are literally a part of it. Shortly before, the narrator had described Tess wandering in the woods by night, commenting: "Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene" (85). When, after being abandoned by Angel, Tess goes to work at Flintcomb-Ash, the narrator uses similar words: "Thus Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the landscape; a field-woman pure and simple, in winter guise" (280).

If, on the one hand, individuals, especially women and Tess in particular, are part of the landscape where they live, the environment, on the other hand, is described as if it were a human being. The field at Flintcomb-Ash where Tess and Marian work is an anthropomorphic entity, while the two girls are reduced to flies:

Every leaf of the vegetable having already been consumed, the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies. (285)

This anonymous, desolate, colourless landscape around Flintcomb-Ash anticipates the kind of environment depicted in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's novel where the close bond between man and landscape is destroyed, thus marking – as we will see – the end of his regional novel. This is the reason why *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* marks a point of no return in the panorama of the *Wessex Novels*. *Tess* coincides with the acme of its author's regionalism, while at the same time foreshadowing its end.

### 3 The Consequences of 'Beach-pebble Attrition'

If Hardy's regionalism was deeply influenced by Romanticism, it is also true however that his originality in the panorama of Victorian provincial literature depends on his making a personal use of Scott's and Wordsworth's

legacy. Regionalism in him went hand in hand with realism (cf. Keith 1979, 36), and from this point of view Hardy went even further. He was indeed so realistic that he decided to include even those elements of modernity that regional novelists generally tended to omit. As W.J. Keith pointed out, “the chief case against regionalism lies in its undue emphasis upon the uniquely local which, almost by definition, leads to distortion” (37). Hardy, on the contrary, not only included references to railways, turnpike roads, threshing machines, the telegraph, etc., but he made these elements of modernity a central issue of his novels. On the other hand, Hardy was not exactly a realist novelist (cf. O’Gorman 2013). In his autobiography Hardy clearly expressed his opinion about the relationship between art (and therefore literature) and realism:

Art is a disproportioning - (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) - of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would probably be overlooked. Hence ‘realism’ is not Art. (Millgate 1989, 239)

The duty of the artist is to emphasise certain aspects of reality, being thus faithful to his or her impressions rather than to nature. Hardy adopted this “art of disproportioning” in his novels and short stories, but another note from the *Life* clarifies what the concept of ‘disproportion’ exactly meant for him:

The real, if unavowed, purpose of fiction is to give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience mental or corporeal. [...] The uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters; and the writer’s art lies in shaping that uncommonness while disguising its unlikelihood, if it be unlikely. (154)

According to Hardy it is the events that must be “throw[n] out of proportion”, rather than the characters, who on the contrary must be as ordinary as possible to allow readers to identify with them. And indeed many of Hardy’s plots – for example *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – have been criticised for their improbability.

Yet Hardy did not limit himself to distorting events through the recourse to coincidences and timing encounters, but he also manipulated on purpose the region where his novels and stories are set, so that from this point of view he can hardly be defined as a ‘regional novelist’. After all Hardy himself reminded those who tried to identify the places mentioned in his novels that his Wessex was a “partly real, partly dream-country” (Morgan & Russell 2000, 393), thus defending the novelists’ right to modify the real world to convey certain ideas. I will not analyse in depth the

use Hardy made of existing places in his novels and short stories. There is however an aspect which is worth considering, as it sheds light on his interpretation of Scott's legacy. Although Hardy decided not to exclude the elements of modernity from his Wessex, on the other hand he often tended to accentuate the gap between the old and the new, thus making Wessex villages and countryside seem quaintier than they actually were. For instance, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he willingly made Casterbridge appear more Elizabethan than the actual Dorchester by deleting seventeenth and eighteenth-century buildings (cf. Enstice 1979, 3-9) and by avoiding any references to railways. The result is that readers familiar with such novels as *The Woodlanders* or *Far from the Madding Crowd* are struck when they realise that in fact modernity has already affected even the most out-of-the-way spots in Wessex.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Hardy did sometimes adopt a realistic approach to Wessex, and at other times decided to 'disproportion' reality, because what he wanted to convey was his full awareness that not only did the South West of England represent the past within the present, but also - and especially - that the 'uneven development' had generated a rupture. And in this lies the main difference between Hardy and Scott. *Waverley's* subtitle, "'Tis Sixty Years Since", hints at the circumstance that the change had been rapid, but by no means immediate, as it had taken modernity two generations (i.e. roughly sixty years) to affect Scotland. Secondly, in Scott the passage from past to present seems to have been certainly traumatic but rather smooth, in the sense that the backward areas were not left behind. The general impression is that the process of integration was somehow achieved. This is not the case in Hardy's Wessex, where we witness a completely different kind of process. First of all, there is a sense in which Wessex was characterised by internal differences well before the advent of modernity. The setting of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a telling example, since in the county-town of Dorset Roman and even Neolithic remains live side by side with Palladian townhouses and Gothic churches. In spite of the internal differences, Hardy's Wessex is characterised by a common feature, that is to say the coexistence - spatial as much as temporal - of different layers of time which do not even seem to reflect a chronological order. Indeed it often happens that remains and practices dating back to prehistoric times are more tangible and visible than more recent artefacts, as in Egdon Heath, where Rainbarrow continues to be a point of reference, while contemporary constructions are engaged in a never-ending, and self-consuming, battle against nature.

4 Indeed railways often recur in Hardy's work, from *Desperate Remedies*, his first published novel, to *Jude the Obscure*, his last novel. Therefore novels set in apparently pre-industrial communities (*Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Woodlanders*) are juxtaposed to novels where the elements of modernity play an important role (cf. Gatrell 1999, 28-9).

Therefore progress does not simply appear as the latest layer of time that settles on the land of Wessex. The passage from a pre-industrial world to modernity is represented as brisk and immediate: so immediate that integration is perforce impossible. Both in *Waverley's* Scotland and in Hardy's Wessex sudden progress engenders temporal lags because in the passage from the Elizabethan to the Georgian age (in Scott) and from the Jacobean to the Victorian (in Hardy) the intermediate stages seem to have been skipped. But in Hardy's Wessex the coexistence (or confusion, to be more precise) of different ages within the same community – and even the same person, as we will see – gives birth to unsolvable conflicts and jarring contradictions. This results in anachronisms, if not in monstrous hircocervuses, that is to say pockets of extreme backwardness juxtaposed to extremely modern places. The monstrous outcomes caused by the excessively rapid irruption of modernity are particularly evident in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, whose setting expands to follow the heroine's peregrinations. Thus we become aware of the dual nature of Wessex, split between tradition and progress, since in one and the same novel remote and backward localities (Marlott and Talbothays) feature together with the outposts of progress.

Moreover, Hardy modified reality in order to make archaic and modern places lie very close one another. The most striking case is that of Sandbourne, a stylish seaside resort, which lies next to Egdon Heath:

This fashionable watering-place, with its eastern and its western stations, its piers, its groves of pines, its promenades, and its covered gardens was, to Angel Clare, like a fairy place suddenly created by the stroke of a wand, and allowed to get a little dusty. An outlying eastern tract of the enormous Egdon Waste was close at hand, yet on the very verge of that tawny piece of antiquity such a glittering novelty as this pleasure city had chosen to spring up. Within the space of a mile from its outskirts every irregularity of the soil was prehistoric, every channel an undisturbed British trackway; not a sod having been turned there since the days of the Cæsars. Yet the exotic had grown here, suddenly as the prophet's gourd [...]. (Dolin & Higonnet 2003, 375-6)

It is interesting to point out here that what Hardy calls “the exotic” is not the prehistoric Egdon, but Sandbourne. This suggests that according to Hardy the uncommon is not the wild, unspoilt, lonely Egdon, but rather the “pleasure city” of recent construction. To the lack of individuality of Sandbourne I will come back later on, but what is worth remarking here is that in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy carries the concept of the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ to extremes. Sandbourne (where Tess lives with Alec) lying at a stone's throw from Egdon is foreshadowed in the Phase the First by the ominous closeness between The Chase, a “sylvan

antiquity" (38) where memories of Druidical rites are still fresh, and The Slopes, a "fake" manor-house of recent construction. Yet in *Tess* Hardy carried the juxtaposition of old and new even further. The last scene of the novel is set in a town where contradictions are the dominating features. In the description of Wintoncester, in the last chapter, the narrator draws our attention on the sharp contrast between the irregular Gothic buildings and the prison where Tess is about to be hanged, a squalid and unimaginative building "bespeaking captivity"<sup>5</sup> which is a "blot on the city's beauty" (397). The circumstance that Wintoncester/Winchester, where the Hospital of St Cross is still well visible, is made the very setting of Tess's punishment by the hands of a pitiless justice is a typically Hardyian irony.

Finally, in *Tess* the coexistence of different epochs is not confined to places alone, but affects human beings as well. The most telling example is Angel Clare, who is undoubtedly a modern man, and yet falls prey to the most reactionary prejudices when he cannot forgive Tess her being the victim of Alec's rape. Tess's personality too is the result of a disordered compound of modern and traditional elements. As we have seen above, unlike her mother, Tess received a modern standard education and wishes to become a teacher, but at the same time superstitious beliefs have not abandoned her yet: the legend of the d'Urberville coach seems to upset her, just as the afternoon cock's crow after her wedding does. And the plot itself seems to suggest that a certain dose of magical thinking, combined with a kind of cynical knowledge only an experienced mother can provide, is of more use in life than school training.

The juxtaposition of different epochs in human beings produces anachronisms which can have monstrous effects. The proof is Tess Durbeyfield herself, who turns into a murderess right in Sandbourne, the place the narrator calls a "glittering novelty". Indeed Angel Clare cannot even imagine Tess living there, to the point that he asks himself: "Where could Tess possibly be, a cottage-girl, his young wife, amidst all this wealth and fashion?" (376). And when Tess kills her old lover Angel calls her act an "aberration" (385), as if to suggest that this time Tess has turned for real into "Another woman in [her] shape" (229), and that the "aberration" was the result of the monstrous union between "a cottage-girl" and a place where the "arithmetical demon Profit-and-Loss" (379) reigns supreme.

5 To be more precise, the narrator does not explicitly say if the prison is of recent erection, but we can venture a guess starting from two details. The prison is characterised by its "formalism" and by "an ugly flat-topped octagonal tower" (Dolin & Higonnet 2003, 397), which remind us of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (theorised in 1787), a central-plan structure where the inmates were unable to understand if they were being watched or not (cf. Božovič 1995). Hence Hardy's Wintoncester appears as a superposition of A.W.N. Pugin's two illustrations from the *Contrasts* where he contrasted a medieval alms-house with a modern workhouse (cf. Pugin 2003). I am indebted to Prof. Jeanne Clegg, who pointed out to me the affinity between Tess's prison and the Panopticon.

The process of modernisation portrayed by Hardy differs from Scott's not only because of its immediacy and non-homogeneity. The main reason why modernity in Hardy appears as catastrophic and, in a certain sense, 'tragic', is that progress is not imposed from without, but comes from within, from Wessex itself (cf. Taylor 1982, 166). In Scott's *Waverley* innovation comes from the South, from England, and Scotland must surrender, sooner or later, and conform itself to the rest of the country. The region of the Borders witnesses the encounter/clash between two centuries, but integration is possible because human nature is at the core unchangeable. Walter Scott underlined this aspect in the introductory chapter to *Waverley*, where he wrote that, although his story is set in the (recent) past, his characters are by no means obsolete, suggesting that anyone can identify with them. Having recourse to the metaphor of book editions, Scott wrote that nature is like a book which remains the same although new editions are issued (cf. Lamont 1998, 5), since the contents (that is to say the core of human nature) remain the same. It is true that Hardy himself stated that Wessex provided him with a representative sample of human nature. But it is also true that in Hardy there is a sense in which human beings experienced a sort of anthropological mutation during the brisk passage from tradition to modernity. Not only the environment, but also the inhabitants seem to have undergone a deep transformation – so deep that they do not even seem to belong to the same species as their fathers.

The most visible consequence of modernisation is the loss of individuality which affects people and places alike. As in Hardy "characters and environment" are closely associated, changes affecting the environment have consequences on the characters, and vice versa. Thus homologation of individuals and places is the inevitable side effect of the advent of progress. This tendency surfaces in many of Hardy's novels and reaches its acme in *Jude the Obscure*. Hints that Wessex, its peculiarities and its highly individualised inhabitants were actually "living on borrowed time" (Gatrell 1999, 28) made their first explicit appearance in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, where Stephen Smith, an unimaginative architect, is set in sharp contrast with his father:

John Smith [...] was a satisfactory specimen of the village artificer in stone. In common with most rural mechanics, he had too much individuality to be a typical 'working-man' – a resultant of that beach-pebble attrition with his kind only to be experienced in large towns, which metamorphoses the unit Self into the fraction of the unit Class. (Dolin & Manford 2005, 83)

John Smith might well have featured among the rustics in such novels as *Under the Greenwood Tree* or *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but he is old, and the future is represented by his son Stephen, whose individuality

has already been lost in that “beach-pebble attrition” going on in large towns. Indeed London and Paris produce the same effects on Clym Yeobright, in whose face “could be dimly seen the **typical** countenance of the future” (Gatrell, Higonnet & Barrineau 2008, 165; emphasis added). At the same time, places too undergo a process of assimilation, becoming ‘types’. Sandbourne is one of them because, with its artificial promenades and its rows of anonymous lodging-houses, it is not so different from many other seaside resorts which mushroomed in the nineteenth century. The incongruous vegetation planted by men makes it appear as “a Mediterranean lounging-place on the English Channel” (Dolin & Higonnet 2003, 376), while The Slopes, screened as it is by Austrian pines, is a sort of Bavarian estate transplanted into the heart of England.

Now, there is a close relationship between the loss of identity of many Hardy characters and the homologation of places. It is true that almost all of Hardy’s characters who leave their places of origin incur in the same fate, that is to say they lose their original identity but are unable to acquire a new one. Yet this is more likely to happen if they are transplanted in places lacking a definite identity. For example Tess’s constitution is not incompatible with Talbothays, even if the valley of the Great Dairies is very different from her Vale of Blackmoor, but it certainly is with Sandbourne, as we have seen. Angel himself abandoned his original natural and cultural ‘habitat’, and this seems to have denaturalised him. Although being from Emminster, a village as remote and rural as Marlott and Talbothays, he was supposed to study and enter the Church. Despite his parents’ plans, Angel desired to become a farmer, but his ‘conversion’ proves disastrous, since, like Clym, he is too educated to belong to Tess’s world, but at the same time he has become different from his father and his brothers.

All these characters – Smith, Tess, Clym, Angel Clare – share a common feature: they have a place (and a family) of origin from where they depart and where they then try to return. On the contrary, the eponymous hero of Hardy’s last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, is an orphan and we do not know where he was born, even if his aunt says he came from Mellstock, where his father was living before his death. Yet Marygreen is unlikely to become Jude’s home, being as anonymous and ‘without history’ as Jude himself. The other places and characters featuring in the novel are no peculiar either. Indeed towns and villages seem to have lost their distinctiveness and they continue to be ‘unique’ only in the mind of the protagonist. Places are so anonymous as to be “little more than names” (Pite 2002, 179), and Christminster seems different (at least, until Jude acknowledges that even the city of his dreams is as dull as the others) only because of the importance attached to it by the protagonist. People too suffer the same fate: minor characters are mere names, while Jude himself is a rather evanescent – or, better, ‘obscure’ – hero (cf. Enstice 1979, 176).

The novel ends with Jude’s death and with his leaving no offspring, but

with *Jude Wessex* too came to an end. After *Jude the Obscure*, perhaps Thomas Hardy thought that regional novels were no longer possible because the vanishing of geographical areas characterised by local peculiarities involved the vanishing of their 'products' too, that is their inhabitants. Thus Hardy brought to the extreme the Wordsworthian concept that man forms a harmonious whole with the environment. In Hardy the bond between man and place is so strict that the decline of highly individualised localities corresponds to the extinction of characters with a clearly defined and unique identity. Hardy did believe that "a certain provincialism of feeling is [...] of the essence of individuality" (Millgate 1989, 151), and this is why the regional novel reached its peak with him, whose novels did indeed illustrate examples of perfect communion between man and place. Yet at the same time Hardy's novels explored the beginning of their utter estrangement, thus foreshadowing the very end of the literary genre which had characterised nineteenth-century English literature. Moreover, by insisting on the universal character of Wessex, Hardy suggested that the process of homologation was by no means confined to the South West of England, or to Great Britain alone. Anthropological mutations cannot be confined to regional areas, as Hardy clearly suggested with the story of Jude's monstrous son Little Father Time who, he wrote, was affected by the new sort of illness which he called the "coming **universal** wish not to live" (Taylor 1998, 337; emphasis added).

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