

## FACE TO FACE WITH NATURE: HARDY, DARWIN AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN KEY SCENES

Current editions of Thomas Hardy, published by Penguin, Macmillan and Everyman, contain no illustrations. Neither did the Wessex Edition of 1912—which the author oversaw and considered to be the standard edition of his works—with the exception of the photographic frontispieces, depicting localities associated with the action but bearing their fictional place-names. A view of Oxford is thus captioned “Christminster” in *Jude the Obscure*. This, then, was the form of illustration that found favour with Hardy.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he allowed his photographer friend Hermann Lea to bring out *Thomas Hardy’s Wessex* in covers that identified the volume as part of the Wessex Edition.<sup>2</sup> It is an illustrated guidebook to the real places in south-west England that had inspired him. We see the real stone coffin in the ruins of Bindon Abbey where Tess lay down to sleep, and Stonehenge where her warm body slept again on stone.<sup>3</sup> To “picture” a Hardy novel is not to call to mind a drawing by some famous illustrator, as it is with Dickens or Lewis Carroll, but to see England. The cliffs in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the wet and wintry woods and apple orchards of *The Woodlanders*, Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, cow pastures in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Oxford seen from afar as if it were the Promised Land in *Jude the Obscure*, and so on. To try to recall the “key visual scenes” will be a personal affair, each reader identifying with different human moments, but it is clear nevertheless that two sorts of “key scenes” emerge. On the one hand, there are the Victorian clichés, the “Present Tense” scenes when characters become symbols (such as when Tess is seen gleaning)<sup>4</sup> or when actions are to be engraved upon the memory of those that will rue their actions<sup>5</sup>—scenes of love and death and hate, the hinges in the plot, the cliff hangers, or other moments when the action comes to a head and the smallest detail becomes symbolic. On the other hand, there are the idiosyncratic scenes, those we consider to be typical of Hardy. It is in those scenes that Hardy places a protagonist in front of nature. The hero is immobile before an unpeopled landscape, and, like a camera, all they can do is take in the visual world.

Nature never was a bed of roses, but there must have been some feeling of comfort in regarding the natural world as a book. For the advocates of Natural Theology, the existence of God was proved by simply casting one’s eyes upon Nature. Even Charles Lyell, in his *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), which some thought contradicted the book of Genesis, could write: “[...] we discover everywhere the clear proofs of a Creative Intelligence, and of His foresight, wisdom and power.”<sup>6</sup> The theme of the Book of Nature was usually developed by Christian apologists, who, in poems or treatises, saw God’s handiwork everywhere: the Book had an Author. And so it was that Nature, taken all together, was depicted as benevolent, for anything else would have been tantamount to blasphemy. The only complication they admitted was that the full extent of the Creator’s providential care was not always immediately visible—by definition, since Providence only reveals itself at the end of time—and so in the meantime “The creation travails, groans” (to quote Robert Browning<sup>7</sup>). It is not necessarily naive to take Nature as a book that has to be decrypted, and turning botanical and geological observations into stories can lead as much to a satisfying sense of order as it can to cruel conclusions. And so the metaphor was kept alive over the centuries. The greatest challenge to the idea of the Book of Nature was another book, Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), in which Intelligent Design is replaced by Evolution, that is to say Natural Selection and the Struggle for Existence,<sup>8</sup> at the core of which is the idea of chance—random differences at birth which determine a creature’s ability to survive. Exit God, enter dice. In addition, since Darwin proves that species are not immutable,<sup>9</sup> then Man is not made in the image of an immutable God, but is merely a temporary phenomenon. Such ideas had consequences on the act of looking and describing, in the field and in the novel.

Darwin's final paragraph,<sup>10</sup> in which he gives his recapitulation as if it were a scientific formula, employing all his keywords, is also important because of its apparently anodyne opening: "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank [...]"<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what poets and novelists would do in their attempt to come to terms with this new philosophical outlook upon the world. It was as if Darwin had written a caption that superimposed itself upon all things visible, a caption made out of his keywords: "Struggle for Life", "war of nature", "Extinction", and also his quieter word, "grandeur". These are not new themes—the mix of "grandeur" and "misère" is in Pascal, and nature is at war against itself in Shakespeare—but Darwin's theory of Evolution was remarkably coherent in pulling a number of apparently anti-Christian arguments all together. Looking and describing an "entangled bank" would become a religious question of greater urgency after 1859.

The photo-historian Michael Bartram has attempted to find evidence of Darwin's influence on landscape photography. But it appears that the evidence is thin. He has found close-ups of ferns and ivy by forgotten photographers, the most convincing for him being "A Bit in the Glen" (Anon., 1867). But there was another reason for taking close-up pictures of vegetation, and Bartram supplies it himself: painters and photographers, following the publication of the first volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in 1843, had been inspired to attend to details, with the added advantage for photographers, from 1851 onwards, that the new wet collodion process, combined with the glossy albumen print, was particularly apt at reproducing sharp detail.<sup>12</sup> Photographers and painters could react in unison to the most famous passage from the programmatic third volume of 1856, when Ruskin comes face to face with the very symbol of the romantic sublime and rejects it: "[...] Mont Blanc and all its aiguilles, one silver flame, in front of me; marvellous blocks of mossy granite and dark glades of pine around me; but I could enjoy nothing, and could not for a long while make out what was the matter with me, until at last I discovered that if I confined myself to one thing,—and that a little thing,—a tuft of moss [...], I began to enjoy it directly [...]"<sup>13</sup>

Is Bartram exaggerating when he comments upon "A Bit in the Glen" and generalizes: "concentrated plant studies could suggest the chaotic struggle between species; the nightmare of uncontrolled procreative urges."<sup>14</sup> One longs to agree with him, but the written evidence is missing, as there is very little theory along those lines to be found in photographic journals of the period. Bartram has to conclude: "The photographers were maddingly reticent about their work [...]"<sup>15</sup> For my part, I have found nothing yet from the pens of photographers in this period that relates directly to Darwin, and must fall back on a single quote unearthed by Bartram. An anonymous critic discusses an exhibition of photographs and is reminded of tangled weeds in literature:

"To lump together some scraps of nature in a faint hope to preserve some organic unity in a more than usually heterogeneous Exhibition, we may mention with admiration Messrs. Ross & Thomson's somewhat murky and tragic *Brambles, Wild Hops, and Ferns* [...] and their *Nettles, Foxglove and Dock-leaves* [...]. It is like reading Keats and Tennyson to look at the soft, white, velvet hair of the poisonous, veined nettle-leaves, green and rank, huddling up in a dark guilty mass to hide where the murdered child was buried, while the bee sings round the white diadems of their beguiling flowers as if nothing was wrong and earth was still a Paradise. How the wild hops, vine-like, cling and twine,—how the hooked bramble, with its square red stalk, trails and spreads."<sup>16</sup>

As Bartram's commentary is famous, and has obsessed me for over twenty years, I would like to quote it at some length:

"Rank vegetation evoked ideas which many Victorians were not anxious to contemplate. One of these was Evolution. The spectacle of voluminous vegetable growth encouraged the vision of life as a mindless, eternal struggle for existence among the species. This haunted the literature of the period, giving rise to descriptions of wastelands of devouring plants: the 'starved ignoble nature' in Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' (1855) [...]; the 'ruinous and deathful riot' of Brushwood in

*Prosperina* (1875), Ruskin's idiosyncratic study of flowers. In Ruskin's vision, as in Browning's and that of the *Athenaeum* photography critic, nature is tainted. Thorns strangle each other, holly collects in 'choked stragglings'; the bramble and the rose are dead [...].<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not photographers were able to communicate their praise, misgivings or doubts concerning Darwin's theory of Evolution, it remains true that the natural sciences flourished in the nineteenth century and that the middle classes, painters and writers, took an amateur interest in geology, botany, entomology, and, more generally, in looking at nature. By the time Thomas Hardy started publishing his novels, the initial shock waves of Darwinism had quieted down, as indeed Darwin himself had toned down his book in successive editions. But Hardy wrote of himself that "As a young man he had been among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*".<sup>18</sup> So how well does Nature fare in Hardy?

Darwinian descriptions are to be found, one of the most remarkable being in *The Woodlanders* at the start of winter:

"On older trees [...] huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling."<sup>19</sup>

Hardy's novels include figures who play the role of the "promising sapling". In *The Woodlanders*, it is the secondary character, Marty South. In the "Struggle for Life" she is not killed outright like Giles Winterbourne, but "slowly strangled" by machinations that leave no room for her. And yet it is with her that the novel starts and finishes, thus giving her more memorability, more visibility, than her mainly passive role in the story would otherwise have given her. And she remains curiously present in the reader's mind all through the novel simply because she is so lengthily spied upon through the window of her home in the first two chapters, sitting next to her coffin-stool.

Hardy was not necessarily inspired by photography when he composed the dozens of scenes in which one character looks on another without being seen. The picture of Marty seen by Mister Percomb is compared to an Impressionist painting: "In her present beholder's mind the scene formed by the girlish spar-maker composed itself into an impression-picture of extremest type, wherein the girl's hair alone, as the focus of observation, was depicted with intensity and distinctness, while her face, shoulders, hands, and figure in general were a blurred mass of unimportant detail lost in haze and obscurity."<sup>20</sup> The aesthetic happens also to conform to Peter Henry Emerson's "differential focusing" (selective focusing without stopping down), but Hardy does not allude to it. Hardy is much more concerned with the warm human eye and with subjective viewpoint.<sup>21</sup> In *Tess*, the milkmaids, their faces warmed by the setting sun, look warmly on Angel Clare from their window, being all three in love with him, and when Angel Clare spies Tess from beneath his cow, he falls in love with her.<sup>22</sup>

The two most memorable scenes in Hardy involving a main character at a key moment in the story finding themselves face to face with Nature are in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. In the former, Bathsheba has just lived the most painful moment of her life, seeing her husband kiss the corpse of Fanny Robin, and being told that she is nothing to him. She runs out of the door into the night and the chapter ends. We next discover her wandering aimlessly; she takes refuge in a thicket, a brake of fern, and sinks down "upon a tangled couch of fronds and stems" and partially sleeps till the morning.<sup>23</sup> It is with her waking that we are concerned. She comes to consciousness almost like a small animal, recognising one thing at a time, one paragraph at a time, in a list that looks like a poem:

"A coarse-throated chatter was the first sound.  
It was a sparrow just waking.

Next: 'Chee-weeze-weeze-weeze!' from another retreat.  
It was a finch.  
Third: 'Tink-tink-tink-tink-a-chink!' from the hedge.  
It was a robin.  
'Chuck-chuck-chuck!' overhead.  
A squirrel.  
Then, from the road, 'With my ra-ta-ta, and my rum-tum-tum!'  
It was a ploughboy."<sup>24</sup>

Her memory returns, but still she sits, hiding even from a schoolboy. The long description of the countryside that follows, which ought to be quoted in its entirety, is structured in such a way as to suggest a fall from a garden paradise to a pit in hell. It starts with the day just dawning, red and yellow petals in her lap, her horses drinking, then she is transfixed by the sight of the dismal swamp, from whose "poisonous coat seemed to be exhaled the essences of evil things in the earth, and in the waters under the earth".<sup>25</sup> Why is this scene, during which nothing happens, as memorable as all the shouting and screaming around the body of poor dead Fanny? Perhaps the question is: how has Hardy built up an image of Nature from one novel to the next, as if it were a recurring character?

The second key scene is possibly the most famous "cliff-hanger" of all time.<sup>26</sup> Mr Knight, having tried to rescue his hat, finds himself on the slope above the precipice, unable to get back, and has to cling on for dear life for over thirteen pages whilst Elfride runs for help, so he thinks, for she is actually stripping off that her clothes might make a rope, and will save him and so link their destinies together, to the detriment of one Stephen Smith:

"By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an embedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called Trilobites. [...] Knight was a fair geologist [...]. Time closed up like a fan before him."<sup>27</sup>

Knight then pictures for himself the whole history of evolution, one extinct species replacing another, and foresees his own extinction. Hardy does not go all the way to suggest the extinction of Man; the Hardy-esque detail is the dead eye.

A typical Hardy scene involves one character being able to spy on another. Such a scene resolves itself naturally enough either when one or another character departs or when the passive character looks back (Tess becomes aware that Angel is looking at her). The scene with Knight like the one with Bathsheba, and other scenes involving a character simply looking, at a heath or some other corner of nature, are the same kind of scene, since they are asking the question: does nature look back? Is there an "eye" in nature, other than the dead eye of fossils or the malignant "eye" of the round swamp? Is the natural world animate? Is there an author behind the Book? Is there a Book? Is there any pattern at all? Any intelligence? The answer for Hardy was clearly "No", and we know his hostility to Christian ideas, so the question was really: how to face such a reality. And the real answer was by portraying a natural world that was not so much hostile as impassive. To convert the wide world into an Egdon Heath and to have like Yeobright "A consciousness of a vast impassivity in all which lay around him".<sup>28</sup> The theme of the impassivity of nature is everywhere in Hardy; it is the climax of any description, the final truth too awful to stomach. And so the sap will pound, the seasons change, nature will appear beautiful and plentiful meanwhile. Nature will "smile". Nature will "sleep". Nature seems to "pause". And Hardy's characters wander in and look on, like Grace Melbury before the sleeping Fitzpiers, impressed; but when Grace turns to the bell-pull, she sees him in the "glass", that is to say the mirror:

"An indescribable thrill passed through her as she perceived that the eyes of the reflected image were

open, gazing wonderingly at her. Under the curious unexpectedness of the sight she became as if spell-bound, almost powerless to turn her head and regard the original. However, by an effort she did turn, when there he lay asleep the same as before. [...] In the reflection from the mirror which Grace had beheld there was no mystery; he had opened his eyes for a few moments, but had immediately relapsed into unconsciousness, if indeed he had ever been positively awake.<sup>29</sup>

It is a curious scene. Easily forgotten by the reader since the episode with the mirror has no consequences. It is as if Hardy could not avoid holding up a mirror to life that breathes but does not react, and seeing therein an eye that sees but does not see. What is seen in the “glass” is the human equivalent to the natural world. An “unconscious portrait”, to borrow the expression Hardy employed for the photographic portrait in *Desperate Remedies*.<sup>30</sup> The illusion of an eye that looks back, and that shocks in making us aware of ourselves.

To be seen when we think we are alone in the world, to be aware of our mortality, our fragility, our dependency on others, our place *within* nature, such are the metaphysical and emotional crests in the groundswell of Hardy’s stories, after the earthquake caused by the publication of *The Origin of Species*. The twin feelings of horror and beauty were caused by studying nature, and as the poison and the cure are often the same plant, so too the anguish of an “existential” fear provoked by the spectacle of the natural world is counterbalanced in Hardy by a vision of the countryside seen through warm eyes. The beauty and the mortality are one, but in motion like a point on a wave. And so Hardy continued to walk with his telescope, to see through a glass eye, to observe the land in its local particulars, and to present what he believed to be an unchristian world in the ebb and flow of visual beauty and visual despair.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay was first published in *Key Scenes*, special issue of *Cahiers Charles V* (2010). A broader study of Hardy and photography is proposed in Paul Edwards, *Soleil noir. Photographie et littérature*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2008, pp. 139-152.

<sup>2</sup> Lea’s tome also contains the “Map of the Wessex of the Novels and Poems” and the Hardy catalogue that are to be found in all 23 volumes of the Wessex Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Lea, *Thomas Hardy’s Wessex*, Macmillan, London, 1913, pp. 293 and 445-446 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), Wessex Edition (1912), Macmillan, London, 1927, chapter XIV, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the scene in Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* when Dombey throws his daughter out of his house.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in the *Portable Victorian Reader*, edited by Gordon S. Haight, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 497.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Browning, “Easter-Day” (1850), *The Poems*, edited by Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 499. Browning is of course quoting Romans 8, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859), edited by J.W. Burrow, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 520.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> “It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense,

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being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. 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." *Ibid.*, chapter XIV, pp. 459-460.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Aspects of Victorian Photography*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1985, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. III (1856), Part IV, chapter x, § 15, quoted in John Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, chosen and annotated by Kenneth Clark (1964), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Bartram, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Anon., *The Athenaeum*, 31 (29 May 1854) p. 692.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Bartram, *op. cit.*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928*, Macmillan, London, 1983, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887), Wessex Edition, Macmillan, London, 1912, Chapter VII, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter II, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Like Zola, Hardy is more literary than "purely" visual, and transforms visual phenomena into texts, such as Clym Yeobright's face: "The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but by his face as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded. His features were attractive in the light of symbols, as sounds intrinsically common become attractive in language, and as shapes intrinsically simple become interesting in writing." (Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878), Wessex Edition (1912), Macmillan, London, 1928, Book III, chapter I, p. 198.)

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Wessex Edition (1912), Macmillan, London, 1927, chapters XXI & XXIV, pp. 174-175 & 191-192 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Wessex Edition (1912), Macmillan, London, 1922, chapter XLIV, p. 346.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter XLIV, pp. 346-347.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter XLIV, p. 348.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), Wessex Edition, Macmillan, London, 1912, chapters XXI-XXII, pp. 234-248.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter XXII, pp. 241-242.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878), Wessex Edition (1912), Macmillan, London, 1928, Book V, chapter III, p. 385.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887), Wessex Edition, Macmillan, London, 1912, chapter XVIII, pp. 150-151.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), The New Wessex Edition, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 151.