

Writing in Space: Thomas Hardy's Wessex

We owe to Dickens our first serious comprehension, even our first sustained observation, of the city as a new form of human experience and consciousness. We owe to Hardy our first serious comprehension and sustained observation of the thickly textured, obscured world, stubbornly but barely surviving, that remained beyond the city limits. It was a world obscure even to itself. It seemed to possess the harmony of a hymn and the settled purpose of a fine still life. Yet it was already in a crisis so deep that even its commonplaces -- the talk at market-day or the moods of young lovers--were fatally tinged with an unspoken grief, a grief that was compounded of the weight of the ancient and the ache of the modern. Hardy's great achievement is his penetrating account of this revision at the heart of the way things were.

I must stress that I am not describing "a world we have lost" thematic or a country vs. city aesthetic (though both of these subjects as well as other formulations for Wessex have their important place). I mean that Hardy, like Dickens, enabled us to perceive a profoundly complex category of cultural and moral experience that was being lived but not yet grasped, that already appeared as action but had not yet appeared as imagination. And just as Dickens had to reconstruct the novel as genre in order to assimilate the city to the work of the narrative imagination, Hardy had to undertake a parallel process by creating a novel that acts rather like a Picasso painting where multiple perspectives both overlap and collide. Hardy felt the gravitational reversals in this world and, understanding a new *physis*, he undertook to narrate its new *nomos*.

What, then, is the Wessex world that Hardy conceived and narrated? Wessex is, simultaneously, a mimesis, a semiosis, and an aesthetic. All three of these processes are crucially bound in Bakhtinian dialogic relation to one another so that Wessex is best understood not as a region but as a text. Hardy situates his text at an intertextual crossroads where we can find all of the following: a thinly disguised representation of southwestern England; an obscure and forgotten Wessex known to the Celts; a hegemonic Wessex that ultimately became England itself; a Wessex already assimilated to the imagination *once* in the form of the Arthurian romances (focally, the romance of Tristram and Iseult) and *again* in the retellings by Tennyson, Arnold, and Swinburne; and, finally, the Wessex that Hardy constructed as an end paper map for the 1895 collected edition of his work. The map, of course, only makes textually visible the implicit map that Hardy had long been offering to his readers. I'll return

to the point briefly below, but it should be said here that Hardy's end paper map is cunning in every respect and most of all in its construction of borders. Its right-hand edge takes us up to the margin of the London metropolis but leaves London itself in ominous absence, while its left-hand edge is crowded to near illegibility by the room it makes for "Off-Wessex," the even more obscure site where the shifting boundaries of Wessex as a history and Wessex as a fiction had their origin. Throughout Hardy's great novels "Off-Wessex" is rather like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, hardly appearing but decisive nonetheless, while the perceived but missing London, like Childe Roland's dark tower, beckons the late narratives forward with ghastly inevitability. Remaining between these borders is the space of narrative, the cracking, aged, but still legible space where narrator and reader struggle to map one another's position and hear one another's voice.

WESSEX AS MIMESIS, SEMIOSIS, AND AESTHETIC

Hardy appreciated that his readers responded agreeably when he "first ventured to adopt the word 'Wessex' from the pages of early English history, and gave it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that ancient kingdom." He "disinterred" the old name for a region whose boundaries were but vaguely known "even by educated people" and he was much gratified when "the press and the public . . .willingly joined [him] in the anachronism of imagining a Wessex population living under Queen Victoria" (*PW* 9-10). Later, in his memoirs (where he wrote of himself in the third person), he says that Wessex subsumed the names of six modern counties in England "whose area he [as narrator] traverses in his scenes . . . an old word that became quite popular [after] he first introduced it. So far did he carry this idea of the unity of Wessex that he used to say he had grown to forget the crossing of county boundaries within the ancient kingdom" (*Life* 122). Obviously, Hardy encouraged his readers to identify the realm of his novels, mimetically, with the geographical space of southwestern England defined by the boundaries of six modern counties. Simon Gatrell makes a key point here: "Confronted, as the reader is in each volume, by a map of part of England . . . labeled Lower Wessex, Upper Wessex, Mid Wessex, and so on . . . the one-to-one relationship . . .becomes compulsory . . .even though Hardy is at pains in many places to disown such unqualified identity between fiction and life."

Yet we must, at last, resist the dominance of the mimetic effect in order to see that Hardy's own rejection of representational realism is embedded in the very construct of Wessex. For Wessex is, as all of his statements about it remind us, a fictional name that used to be an

historical name for the same place. There is, in other words, a deliberately problematized boundary between the imagined and the historical. Modern Wessex is only a dim reflection of a more vibrant historical kingdom which, in turn, is itself re-constructed as a sort of "dream land" (Hardy's term) in the imagination of the fictional characters who are demonstrably inscribed by its residual cultural presence. At every point in the Wessex Novels, we are fated to ask: which Wessex? The land that seems to lie before us is constantly evoking a vanished Wessex that often re-emerges so pointedly and poignantly as to reduce the contemporary Wessex to a pale and befuddled copy. But ancient Wessex was an even more befuddled place, endlessly reshaped by the territorial wars, linguistic confusions, and clashing cultures of Romans, Celts, and Saxons. Yet somehow (at least in nineteenth-century historiography) by the end of the ninth century Wessex had developed as a hegemonic kingdom that eventually become England itself. These conditions produce in Hardy's texts a Wessex that is a forum of discourses and layered identities. Necessarily, all of the characters in the Wessex Novels are caught in an existential drift like "Tess Durbeyfield, otherwise d'Urberville, somewhat changed--the same, but not the same; at the present stage of existence living as a stranger and an alien here, though it was no strange land that she was in" (75). Or they are as much epiphenomena of transitory space and light as enduring "natives"--like the choir in *Under the Greenwood Tree*: "They too had lost their rotundity with the daylight, and advanced against the sky in flat outlines which suggested some processional design on Greek or Etruscan pottery." Hardy's novels always engage us in a Paterian impressionism, indeed in a cubism of reconstructions and rearticulations of the same figure in many forms (Jude as Jude, Jude as Phillotson, Jude as Father Time) because all figures are extended across the space, the time, and, most importantly, the discourses of Wessex.

It must be said, however, that Hardy does not abandon his readers to what Carlyle called "the signless inane." Hardy's "idiosyncratic mode of regard," his curious (pre-cubist) term for the individual artist's vision, is a powerfully penetrating aesthetic, modeled, crucially, on the Wessex world. At one point, as he is describing the main characters in *The Woodlanders*, the narrator tells us that "the casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon that wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods had been with these two . . . a clear gaze. . . They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing; to them the sights and sounds of night, winter, wind, storm . . . were simple occurrences whose origin, continuance, and laws they foreknew. . . . [T]ogether they

had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet." What this passage and others like it suggest is that Wessex models Hardy's aesthetics. In the midst of all "runic obscurity" Hardy invokes a Proustian sense of the woven structure of experience--"I see the hands of the generations/ That owned each shining familiar thing"--and despite the vanishings, reversals, deracinations, and ghastly beckonings, this aesthetic of solidarity, like Wessex itself, extends to us, human positions from which we can read the signs that bind us to our place, our time, our other. This is a Wessex we reach by performance, by collaborating with the narrator in order to interiorize and rearticulate the multiple voices and gestures that echo through and through the Wessex world. (Our cues to performance are very often scripted by the narrator's heavy use of mummies, actors, musicians, dancers, etc. as minor but crucial figures in the novels.)

Wessex as Chronotope

Hardy's fictional text, thus conceived, can best be studied from the perspective on fiction worked out by M. M. Bakhtin. The relevance of Bakhtin's theoretical formulations to Hardy's creation of Wessex is especially clear in his germinal notion of the chronotope or "time-space." Bakhtin regards the modern novel as a genre founded on a sort of intelligible hubbub. Novelistic discourse is a form of utterance particularly attuned to the inescapable condition that words and utterances virtually never hug the shore of a particular speaker's consciousness but are almost always at once swept out into the larger currents of discourse made by other words and other voices that form the expressive order of the cultural world. Bakhtin's central concern, therefore, is with the dynamism of texts, their echoing, altering, intersecting patterns of discourses that resist "finalizable" states. This is a very inadequate description of what Bakhtin theorizes as "dialogism," his term for the way utterances are produced by the fluid crossings of social agents, social contexts, the laminated nature of language, the persistently percussive effects of consciousness connecting with materiality, and the systematic influences of temporal and spatial categories on all our speech and writing. The concept of the chronotope develops naturally from these assumptions. All discourse is discourse within a chronotope that is both richly particularized and subtly shaped by the general conditions of discourse itself. In a novelistic text, another complicating factor is present since the historical givenness of time and space is dialogically fused with

the imaginatively invented time and space of the story. Bakhtin sees the novelist's configurations of time and space as decisive: "The ability to see *time*, to *read time* in the spatial whole of the world and [similarly] to perceive the filling of space not as an immobile background, a given that is completed once and for all, but as an emerging whole, an event--this is the ability to read in everything signs that show time in its course, beginning with nature and ending with human customs and ideas" (*Speech Genres* 25). Thus, the following famous scene from *The Return of the Native* is a *reading* of time and space, not just a recording of scenic detail:

The traveler's eye hovered about these things for a time and finally settled upon one noteworthy object up there. It was a barrow. . . . [But this] highest object in the whole prospect round, was surmounted by something higher. It rose from the semi-globular mound like a spike from a helmet. The first instinct of an imaginative stranger might have been to suppose it the person of one of the Celts who built the barrow, so far had all of modern date withdrawn from the scene. It seemed a sort of last man among them, musing for a moment before dropping into eternal night with the rest of his race.

Observations of this sort permeate the Wessex novels and constantly require us to see multiple discourses (multiple histories in this case) that infiltrate the discourses of characters, re-framing and enlarging their slim utterances as individuals. As the narrative's braiding of its dialogic text proceeds, we face again and again, like the traveler peering at the strange hilltop scene, dramatic juxtapositions and interweavings of lore, legend, romance, and history. The chronotopic identity of Wessex is distinguished by its persistent voicings of these quite different categories of cultural formation.

Wessex: From Tristram to Jude

At the core of the chronotope is Hardy's subtle, and essentially unrecognized appropriation of the Arthurian romances as deeply resonant discourses that he layers within his own novelistic discourse. Arthur is the very emblem of the problem of indefinite boundaries between the historically traceable and the imaginatively projected. But perhaps even more significantly, Wessex as the traditional site of the Arthurian world mirrors precisely the same indeterminacy since it is a fictional presentation superimposed on an historical reality which had already, in the narrative art of the medieval romancers, been constructed fictively in

an attempt to encode in art a yet earlier historical memory descending from Celtic times.

Hardy's Arthurian appropriation is distorted and altered from the original, a characteristic feature of his intertextual borrowings in general. I will concentrate here on the key Arthurian borrowing Hardy makes, which is the romance of Tristram and Iseult. Like the Tristram and Iseult story, the narrative structures of the major Wessex Novels often take the form of a chiasmus. Four characters, two men, two women, become involved in a dance-like pairing and unpairing (Hardy himself compared the plot of *Jude the Obscure* to a quadrille.) One of the two men, like Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridg*, begins in a sort of apprenticeship to an older man, reflecting the relationship of Tristram and King Mark. The two women, e.g. Thomasin and Eustacia Vye, are beloved by one of the men (and sometimes by both, as happens in *The Mayor*). The two women tend to be contrasted, one domestic and quiet, the other exotic and sensual. Just as in the romance, one of the men finds himself virtually giving the beloved woman to the other man. It should be remembered that Hardy used the Tristram story in one of his earliest lyrics, "When I Set Out for Lyonesse" (his own personal favorite) and wrote a parodic drama about it, *The Queen of Cornwall*, as almost his last literary production. The distortions are fascinating. Tess of the D'Urbervilles names her illegitimate son "Sorrow" echoing precisely what Tristram's mother does. But in Hardy's novel it is the son who dies, Tess going on to be inserted in the role of *both* Iseults, Iseult of the White Hands in her innocent youth but driven more and more toward her counter-identity as Iseult of Ireland, while Angel (the harp-playing Tristram figure) ultimately pushes Tess into a return to her "husband." Or, to take another example, Jude brings Sue to Phillotson to marry, but Sue lacks Iseult of Ireland's erotic nature, while Arabella is cast in the role of the domestic Iseult of the White Hands but is brimming with sensuality. These examples can only hint at the richly dialogized relationship that Hardy creates between the discourse of medieval romance and his own remodeling of the modern novel. The pivotal point is the traditional site of the Tristram story in Lyonesse--i.e., in Cornwall, or the area Hardy called "Off-Wessex." His first assimilation of the Tristram materials occurs in his early novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872) which actually uses Tintagel, always associated with King Mark and often associated with King Arthur, as a setting. Hardy's ensuing novels ultimately take us across the whole Wessex chronotope until, in *Jude*, we reach the very fringes of London. One of the most important features of *Jude* is that the texture of the Wessex world essentially disappears in it. We find a setting nearly denuded of the romantic emotions and idiomatic

attachments that traditional Wessex had always to some degree authenticated. We leave its world of resonant texts and enter Christminster's world of desiccated texts. But from this borderland, *Jude* looks back across a vast narrative of interconnected texts, the Wessex Novels, whose gradual evolution as Hardy's collected utterance, imitates the even larger interplay of historical, mythic, romantic, and novelistic discourses that constitute Wessex itself.

Finally, we must recognize how deeply Hardy's work is rooted in dialogic tension with the texts of his own time. The Arthurian romances became, after their initial medieval popularity, a scorned and minimized literary production with rich, though not exclusive Wessex settings. During the Victorian period, however, they were recognized as a foundational literary production and ardently (if fancifully) identified with Wessex settings. It was Tennyson who lifted the Arthurian romances out of their archival slump and popularized Arthur's connections with Tintagel, Glastonbury, Cadbury Castle, and even Stonehenge, all places Hardy dwells on in various Wessex novels. Hardy's use of the Arthurian materials that Tennyson, and slightly later poets like Arnold, popularized are extensive, poignant, and very complicated. At its core, however, is a challenge to Victorian medievalism and the ideological imperatives that subtend it. Hardy, like Swinburne in his own powerful version of the Tristram story, re-writes *The Idylls of the King*. He aims to show how in Tennyson's allegory the structure of power that is supposedly crumbling remains in place, while the structure of passions that Tennyson feared had faded to a Phillotson-like impotence. In Hardy's reading, the signal mark of the *Idylls* (as echoed again and again in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*) is their chronotopic emptiness. Hardy's own effort was to engage us in dialogic relation to a chronotopic fullness so that we might, in our performance as readers, regain the passions that produced it.