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A LANDSCAPE THAT BREATHES:
THOMAS HARDY’S WESSEX
by
Beverly Croydon

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Thomas Hardy weaves an entrancing tale of a vain, proud woman and her education in matters of love. The highly evocative style he uses capitalizes on his knowledge of rural life and allows him the freedom to integrate the rural Wessex landscape as a structural component in his novel. The scenes are palpable. Every nuance of the landscape carries a vital force, and the world he creates ultimately lives. By comparison with other English novelists who focus on rural England, such as George Eliot, Hardy intimately relates his landscape rather than using it as a backdrop. Whether emerging from, hiding in, or integrated with this landscape, his rustic characters are one with their environment. Hardy often accomplishes this by a form of “painting” with words. Let us look more closely at these elements.

Hardy frequently describes forms emerging from the landscape and gradually changing into their normal shapes. When Bathsheba Everdene and Gabriel Oak are at Norcombe, she sees his face “rising like the moon behind the hedge.”1 Much later Fanny Robin, on her death-walk to Casterbridge, sees a large shape emerge from the shadows across the bridge at the point when she is collapsing. The shape slowly materializes as a large dog that helps her by steadying her weight so that she can finally reach the town. Still later, after Fanny is buried, Bathsheba sees a form emerge quietly from the shadows when she is visiting the graveyard. The shape gradually becomes that of Oak.

An element of voyeurism, which adds a strong dimension of mystery to this novel, emphasizes who is on the outside in a given
situation. The voyeur is always out-of-doors, somehow hidden by the landscape. Oak’s viewpoint the first time he sees Bathsheba is from behind a hedge near the road where her wagon is travelling. Her vanity is revealed as he observes her looking in her mirror, thinking she is alone. Shortly afterward, Oak visits Bathsheba and her aunt, but before he enters the cottage he watches them through a hole below the roof, from “a bird’s-eye view, as Milton’s Satan first saw Paradise.” (FMC pg. 14) Oak’s character is not clearly defined at this point, but mystery is building, and this description prepares one for significant disasters. Oak’s voyeurism, as opposed to open confrontation, causes his “sentiments” for Bathsheba to deepen although there is no corresponding development possible on her part until she begins to know him as he is coming to know her. Much later, Bathsheba stands as the outsider beside Oak’s house. She wants to talk to someone after discovering that Fanny Robin had a child, but she leaves without knocking. Still later, a year after his accident, Troy listens and watches, unseen, behind the tent in which Bathsheba and Boldwood talk at the Greenhill country fair. And again, on Christmas Eve before entering Boldwood’s house, Troy observes the party from outside.

These are instances of people emerging from or hiding in the landscape, but Hardy is even more imaginative in his descriptions of people integrated with it. The maltster is like a tree; his malthouse, a “hole” from which he cannot be “drawn.” (FMC pg. 61) Bathsheba’s charwoman is like a “dried Normandy pippin.” (FMC pg. 65) Liddy Smallbury is “like a little brook, though shallow, [she is] always rippling.” (FMC pg. 83) And the men at the inn where Joseph stops on the way to Weatherbury, while carting Fanny’s body home, speak of her as “clay, urging all men to assume a carpe diem attitude toward life. (FMC pg.254) Oak refuses a clean glass and clean bacon at the maltster’s. He will use the same the others use because he never fusses about dirt in its pure state.” (FMC pg. 76) Oak’s love for Fanny, he in his barracks and she across the river, as though the “wall was holding a conversation with the snow.” (FMC pg. 76) Oak’s love for Bathsheba very early in the novel, when she leaves Norcombe, is like a river which is “placid and regular” but flows “deep and long.” (FMC pg. 30) When Oak arrives at Weatherbury Upper Farm,
Bathsheba's newly acquired property, he comes by wagon, but he is invisibly bedded down in hay, and the drivers do not see him. He jumps out of the wagon and sees a fire in a rick-yard. As he approaches, shadows of a hedge flicker across him, merging his body with the fire and hedge. In a poignant moment after Bathsheba flees from Fanny's dead body and Troy, she goes out into the night for comfort. Finding a thicket, or brake, of withering fern, she sits on a "tangled couch of fronds and stems," pulls armfuls of ferns around her as a protection until the morning, and eventually wakes up covered with red and yellow leaves that fell in the night. (FMC pg. 267)

These descriptions of closely allied man and nature provide a thoroughly integrated background for a point of startling contrast. Sergeant Troy stands out against them like a new penny. The night meeting of Troy and Bathsheba in the dark fir plantation emphasizes the contrast. When the lantern door is opened, Troy is "brilliant in brass and scarlet." (FMC pg. 142) He, too, is natural, but in a negative way; his actions are "less of a locomotive than a vegetative nature," determined always by mere chance. (FMC pg. 147) He appears either as "a bright scarlet spot" or "a dim spot of artificial red." In the sword scene his flashing sword "shut[s] out earth and heaven" as he sculpts her form in the air about her, then rapes a lock of her hair with a flourish. But quiet, slow-moving nature can convict Troy of the lies that have become second nature to him. Oak discovers that Troy lied about sitting upstairs at church because a "sprig of ivy" about one-foot long has grown from the wall to the door "delicately tying" it shut. (FMC pg. 171) So, although Troy flamboyantly defies his country origins, he proves subject to natural laws.

Hardy uses a specific method of joining people to the surrounding landscape. Reminiscent of Rossetti, he conjures episodes out of words in such detail that they colorfully and skillfully evolve into a "picture." The winter sunrise against Bathsheba's snow-covered farm is like "red and flameless fire" on a "white hearthstone." (FMC pg. 89) Boldwood's boots, as he follows Bathsheba from the sheep-washing, affirm his intentions. They are "yellow with pollen from the buttercups" and "bronzed in artistic gradations." (FMC pg. 110) He
is about to propose marriage. Frequently, Hardy uses a favorite Pre-Raphaelite color, white, to describe faces that stand out from their surroundings. Bathsheba's face, while she is in Bath marrying Troy, is "white as a lily." (FMC pg. 195) After they return and Troy leans out of her bedroom window before announcing their marriage, Oak turns white. Boldwood's face is also drained of color when he learns of the marriage. Bathsheba loses color after Troy's death and her illness. Her white skin contrasts sharply with her jet black mourning dress so that she appears "preternatural." (FMC pg. 344)

Color is also used to show opposition, motion, and detail. Sergeant Troy, the cause of much desperation, is painted in a red and gold uniform, which always provides a touch of brilliant but artificial color against the neutral tones of the countryside. Color moves in the description of flocks of sheep, each flock a different color, ascending the road up a hillside to Greenhill country fair. Boldwood's closet, full of presents waiting for Bathsheba until their marriage in six years, is described in colorful and glowing detail.

Several longer passages are quoted below in order to recreate the flavor of Hardy's word-painting. A description of sheep-shearing on a hot June day reinforces the intimate connection between the landscape, the farm laborers, and the animals:

It was the first day of June...the landscape, even to the leanest pasture, being all health and colour. Every green was young, every pore was open, and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice. God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town. Flossy catkins of the later kinds, fern-sprouts like bishops' croziers, the square-headed moschatel, the odd cuckoo-pint,—like an apoplectic saint in a niche of malachite,—snow-white ladies'-smocks, the toothwart, approximating to human flesh, the enchanter's night-shade, and black-petaled doleful-bells, were among the quainter objects of the vegetable world in and about Weatherbury at this teeming time...[None of the shearers] were clothed to any extent worth mentioning, each appearing to have hit in the matter of raiment the decent mean between a high and
low caste Hindoo. An angularity of lineament, and a
fixity of facial machinery in general, proclaimed that
serious work was the order of the day...Here the
shearers knelt, the sun slanting in upon their bleached
shirts, tanned arms, and the polished shears they
flourished, causing these to bristle with a thousand rays
strong enough to blind a weak-eyed man. Beneath them
a captive sheep lay panting, quickening its pants as
misgiving merged in terror, till it quivered like the hot
landscape outside. (FMC pgs. 125-127)

Hardy calls this a "picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred
years ago," emphasizing the long tradition and continuity evident in
Wessex. (FMC pg. 127)

A second quote describes Troy's sword-play with Bathsheba in the
pit on a midsummer evening. Bathsheba's perception of nature is that
it is verdant and caressing:

The pit was a saucer-shaped concave, naturally
formed, with a top diameter of about thirty feet, and
shallow enough to allow the sunshine to reach their
heads. Standing in the centre, the sky overhead was
met by a circular horizon of fern: this grew nearly to the
bottom of the slope and then abruptly ceased. The
middle within the belt of verdure was floored with a
thick flossy carpet of moss and grass intermingled, so
yielding that the foot was half-buried within it....Bathsheba saw a sort of rainbow, upside down in the
air....[from Troy's sword, whose] circling gleams were
accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a
whistling—also springing from all sides of her at once.
In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and
of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close
at hand. (FMC pgs. 161-163)

But the word-painting that most significantly expresses the power
of the cosmic relationship between people and landscape in general,
and between Bathsheba and Oak in particular, comes the night of the
harvest feast. Troy has enticed the farm laborers to drink brandy, and being unused to strong drink, they pass out so that only Oak, who has remained sober, can save the newly stacked ricks when nature threatens. The scene is the most extended in the novel. Graphically painted in snapshots taken one after another and eerily lit by an electrical storm, the sequence is punctuated by darkness where only feelings can be observed until faint perceptions grow; then another flash comes to brighten the landscape once again. Oak has noticed nature’s warning of an approaching storm. Toads, slugs, and spiders come indoors. Sheep stand huddled in tightly packed concentric rings:

A light flapped over the scene, as if reflected from phosphorescent wings crossing the sky, and a rumble filled the air. It was the first move of the approaching storm....Manoeuvres of a most extraordinary kind were going on in the vast firmamental hollows overhead. The lightning now was the colour of silver, and gleamed in the heavens like a mailed army....Every hedge, bush, and tree was distinct as in a line engraving....A poplar in the immediate foreground was like an ink stroke on burnished tin. The picture vanished, leaving the darkness so intense that Gabriel worked entirely by feeling with his hands. (FMC pg. 219)

The rich graphic detail builds up, layer upon layer, until a full sequence of flash impressions has been constructed. By words alone, the reader is drawn into Hardy’s frame as though it were reality. In several instances Hardy pushes the painting analogy too far. Rather than relying on carefully chosen words to convey his message, he points to specific analogies between people and certain painters’ works. For example, Bathsheba’s face is the “angry crimson of a Danby sunset” when Oak tells her that her conduct toward Boldwood is unworthy. (FMC pg. 117) And Maryann with her “brown complexion” and “working wrapper” has the “mellow hue of an old sketch in oils—notably some of Nicholas Poussin’s.” (FMC pg. 133) Hardy’s descriptions more than adequately convey the intended comparison. He does not need to point so directly.
Hardy also uses the device of painting in silhouette or relief. Several ominous portents are introduced this way. After Oak’s younger dog has run the pregnant sheep over the edge of the chalk-pit, Oak first sees him silhouetted against the sky “dark and motionless as Napoleon at St. Helena.” (FMC pg. 33) After Bathsheba returns from her despairing flight into the woods, the church tower, visible from the farmhouse windows, is seen against a “livid cloud” and is lit by a “blood-red” sunset. (FMC pg. 272) Upon leaving Casterbridge, Oak looks up and sees human forms on top of the gaol entrance where gallows are being constructed for Boldwood’s execution. In a slightly different vein, more as an insight into character, Boldwood sees Oak, a figure like “black snuff in the midst of a candle-flame” with “square skeleton masses” of hurdles and a dog against a winter sunrise. (FMC pg. 90) This image evokes a memory of Oak’s tragedy with the sheep and the flame he carries for Bathsheba, but it also hints at the light and support he will provide in the future. Occasionally, Hardy implies line drawings as well. For example, at the maltster’s the mens’ faces, lit by light from the ashpit, grow “long and liny.” (FMC pg. 53) And Bathsheba’s white face is composed only of lines after Troy is killed. (FMC pg. 336) These instances of Hardy’s deliberate work-painting underline the poetic quality of the novel as well. The scenes build, metaphor shaping object and object becoming symbol until a very complex level of integration is achieved, an integration that echoes the one between people and landscape.

At this point a comparison with George Eliot’s use of landscape in a novel of the same period, *Adam Bede*, is instructive. We will compare the two authors’ use of geographical description, characters in relation to landscape, personification of landscape, and emotional involvement of the reader. In the “introduction” to the Riverside Edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd* Richard L. Purdy quotes Hardy regarding George Eliot, “‘she had never touched the life of the fields’ and...her country people were ‘more like small townsfolk than rustics.’ ”2 Purdy comments on Hardy’s rustics in contrast: “For all their tireless humour, he makes them the voice of good sense....Here in these rustic characters and their ‘traditions and humours’ is ‘the
life of the fields’ at its best.” (AB pg. xv) Since most of the characters in both novels could be called rustics or peasants and since the life of the outdoors is significant to such characters, we can compare the authors’ use of landscape to see its effect on characterization and mood. In Adam Bede the use of landscape functions either as a foil for or reinforcement of the main characters. Hardy’s landscapes also frequently function this way, but they are integrated into the structure in such a way that they cannot be seen as separate from it. Let us examine Eliot’s geographical descriptions more closely.

The two shires that provide a backdrop for Eliot’s characters are Loamshire with its village of Hayslope and Stonyshire with its village of Snowfield. These shires are in the North Midlands of England, an area which is generally colder and bleaker than Hardy’s more southern county of Wessex. This may be one of the reasons that most of the action in Adam Bede takes place indoors. There are trips through woods and along lanes, but the atmosphere of the workshops, cottages, dairies, and houses predominates; therefore, the significance Eliot derives from the outdoors could never assume the importance it does for Hardy. Loamshire with its lush green valleys, brimfull, streams, and tall trees contrasts to Stonyshire with its craggy, barren gray upland rocks. Loamshire supplies the stage for the earthy characters, both peasant and aristocrat; Stonyshire for Dinah Morris, the stoical Methodist lay-preacher, who denies herself the earthy life in order to serve God more fully. Most of the action takes place in Loamshire, but Stonyshire stands in wait, ready to underline Hetty’s forlorn search for Arthur, her trial, and Adam’s quest for both Hetty and Dinah. As the action shifts from lush fields and valleys to barren, rocky ground and back, the reader automatically shifts his mental picture and his anticipation of the outcome of a character’s actions.

The first description of Hayslope provides an excellent example of Eliot’s use of landscape:

That rich undulating district of Loamshire to which Hayslope belonged, lies close to a grim outskirt of Stonyshire, overlooked by its barren hills as a pretty blooming sister may sometimes be seen linked in the arm of a rugged, tall swarthy brother; and in two or
three hours' ride the traveller might exchange a bleak treeless region, intersected by lines of cold grey stone, for one where his road wound under the shelter of woods, or up swelling hills, muffled with hedgerows and long meadowgrass and thick corn; and where at every turn he came upon some fine old country-seat nestled in the valley or crowning the slope, some homestead with its long length of barn and its cluster of trees and thatch and dark-red tiles....High up against the horizon were the huge conical masses of hill, like giant mounds intended to fortify this region of corn and grass against the keen and hungry winds of the north; not distant enough to be clothed in purple mystery, but with sombre greenish sides visibly specked with sheep.... And directly below them the eye rested on a more advanced line of hanging woods, divided by bright patches of pasture of furrowed crops, and not yet deepened into the uniform leafy curtains of high summer, but still showing the warm tints of the young oak and the tender green of the ash and lime. (AB pgs. 13-14)

This description precedes Dinah's sermon on the green, but it fades in the presence of her inspired monologue, becoming almost a backdrop. Indeed, Eliot's major strength is her dialogue rather than her descriptive passages. By contrast, Hardy lets the landscape grow out of his descriptions of action rather than provide scenery. For example, in the early pages of *Far from the Madding Crowd* when Oak first sees Bathsheba, Hardy does not pull back to give a bird's-eye or traveller's view; instead, he places Oak in a field behind a hedge on a sunny and mild December morning. Oak watches Bathsheba in her yellow wagon, sitting atop the furniture. Then, in Chapter II, Hardy emphasizes the impression Bathsheba has made on Oak by describing the spot he first saw her, this time without people, at midnight a few days later:

A desolating wind wandered from the north over the hill....Norcombe Hill...was one of the spots which
suggest to the passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil—an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down. (FMC pg. 8)

This “protuberance” metaphorically describes Oak. Hardy is not talking about Oak specifically. He is talking about the landscape, yet Oak’s qualities are bound up in that landscape, in fact project and grow from his close connection with it. Considering the tone of these two passages, Hardy emphasizes the poetic in the landscape much more than Eliot. Contrast “far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices” with “huge conical masses of hill, like giant mounds.” Hardy’s choice of words suggests human sensations. One feels the destructive quality of those stones, what they might do if they were set in motion. Eliot’s stones are static; their destructive potential is not evoked through potential action but through what they represent—a wasteland that gives no succor to its inhabitants. Hardy’s stones, in contrast, as a result of unleashed organic forces, could release an enormously destructive power. The potential hovers within the image because of Hardy’s choice of words.

In addition, Hardy personifies his landscapes, something which Eliot rarely does. In the example just cited the precipices are “dizzy,” and they are whipped by a wind that flounders as it grumbles or moans; grows a tongue and ferrets out dry leaves; rubs, rakes, and brushes the grasses; wails and “chants” like a choir; sobs; then hurries away. The description is so beautifully conceived and executed that Hardy’s wind catches one and imaginatively carries one along. George Eliot, on the other hand, does not want the reader to become so thoroughly enmeshed in the action of her novel. Although she literally brings us into her settings by stating that she is “taking us inside” a room or along a lane, she does not make the landscape live. Even in the scene where Adam hears the tap of the nonexistent willow wand on the door, presaging his father’s death
according to an old superstition, Eliot relies on the strangeness of the event to create atmosphere. Hardy would have evoked a peculiar atmosphere that sprang from every pore of every object surrounding Adam and was echoed by nature outside before he inserted such a device. In other words, Hardy would have embedded the supernatural action in his landscape.

Eliot's style keeps the reader a distant, objective observer and reporter. She does not require that the reader's emotions become involved to the extent that Hardy does. Her purpose is to teach by conveying message through event; Hardy's is to teach by forcing the reader to experience the interconnections between environment and personality.

Comparing the respective downfalls of Hetty and Bathsheba, one finds the Donnithorne Chase to be a "delicious labyrinthine wood" of various kinds of trees, the kind of wood "most haunted by the nymphs." Hetty and Arthur meet "under an avenue of limes and beeches" on a still, sunshiny afternoon. The light barely reaches the moss-edged path. Destiny is personified, rather than nature. She hides her "cold awful face behind a hazy radiant veil,...encloses us in warm downy wings, and poisons us with violet-scented breath." (AB pg. 125) It is significant that destiny, an abstract concept, is personified as nature. Eliot goes one moral step beyond Hardy. For him nature itself would be throwing flames of sunlight and scattering whispers of winds among the trees. Then, all nature would arise, warning the lovers of the consequences of their actions.

Compare Hetty and Arthur with Bathsheba and Troy in the scene quoted earlier. They descended into the earth, into a dark, "natural" pit, their bodies in shadow, their heads in sunshine. Ferns rise to meet the sky, and the lovers stand on "a thick flossy carpet of moss and grass intermingled, so yielding that the foot [is] half-buried within it." (FMC pg. 161) They literally enter the earth for this dramatic episode that will change both their lives forever. Before Adam sees Hetty and Arthur he notices that the corn is being blown out of its husks and falling too early as "untimely seed." This provides a "presentiment" of Hetty's untimely fall. He also notices "grand beeches," one in particular, which he has in his "memory, as a painter does, with all the
flecks and knots in their bark, all the curves and angles of their
boughs.” (AB pg. 289) But Eliot’s word-painting in no way equals
Hardy’s. He continually draws, sculpts, and paints with words in such
subtle and integrated ways that one is hardly aware of the world
outside the one he is creating.

The closing scenes of both novels reveal a surface-level similarity
in that the hero and heroine marry after surmounting numerous
obstacles and changing the course of their love several times. George
Eliot ends Adam Bede by focusing on the Bede home. From a
distance one sees its “buff walls and the soft grey thatch” as it was in
the beginning of the novel. However, Dinah and her children appear,
along with Seth, to greet Adam as he returns home from work. The
children see Adam’s form through the hedge in glimpses as he walks
along the lane. Then he emerges in full sight to greet them. Hardy
concludes with Bathsheba and Oak’s wedding day. All four natural
elements that have been in frequent turmoil throughout the novel are
now present but subdued: the air is “damp” and “disagreeable”;
water hovers in the air in the form of mist so that Bathsheba and Oak
need umbrellas; fire rises in her “incarnadined” cheeks, provides the
element necessary to brew their tea, and ignites the cannon late in the
day; and, of course, the earth surrounds them. The support the earth
continues to provide cloaks their contentment as Little Weatherbury
and Upper Weatherbury Farms, along with Bathsheba and Oak, are
joined. The earth almost breathes a sigh of relief as the farms and the
couple settle into its embrace. George Eliot may have loved the
country, but, clearly, Thomas Hardy married it.

FOOTNOTES

1Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd, ed. Richard L. Purdy
p. 16. All succeeding references preceded by FMC are from this
book.

2George Eliot, Adam Bede (New York: Washington Square Press,
1966) p. xiv. All succeeding references preceded by AB are from this
book.