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[[essay date 1987] In the following essay, Page discusses several ways in which Hardy uses everyday objects to create meaning in his fiction.]

Comfort, in the sense of physical well-being that it now normally carries, as when we speak of the comfort offered by an armchair, is a relatively modern usage. For Jane Austen, for example, who tends to be conservative and backward-looking in matters of semantics, the word often carries emotional and moral rather than physical associations: in Mansfield Park she can speak of 'comfortable hopes' and make Lady Bertram say that she will be 'comfortable' now that Fanny has returned to give her support and consolation. The shift of emphasis from the mental to the physical reminds us that the material circumstances of daily existence in the western world have improved immeasurably in the last two or three centuries, and, conversely, that the lives of our more remote ancestors were passed in domestic surroundings which, except for the very wealthy, were of an austerity we should now find barely tolerable. To quote the historian J. H. Plumb, 'the growing wealth and security of the gentry and pseudo gentry after 1700 led them to indulge a passion for things ...',¹ the bareness of earlier interiors gave way to homes and rooms filled with material evidence of the affluence and stability of the better times that had come.

It can hardly be a coincidence that the same period saw the rise in England of the novel, that literary form which most fully and circumstantially presents man in his social and domestic context; and the heyday of the novel of high realism in the Victorian age corresponds to a period of unprecedented lavishness in the stocking of the bourgeois home and the surrounding of daily experience with objects. The fully-furnished fiction of that period reflects a 'passion for things' that was also indulged, as the new art of photography duly recorded, in thousands of parlours and bedrooms.

In this, as in so many respects, Dickens wrote (in Bagehot's splendid phrase) like a 'special correspondent for posterity'; and one of Dickens's favourite descriptive devices is the inventory, the cataloguing of items of the kind that Wemmick in Great Expectations designates 'portable property'. In Bleak House, a 'best parlour', glimpsed once and once only, is seen with the comprehensive auctioneer's
eye (the actor Macready once called it a 'clutching eye') that Dickens is apt to bring to any interior:

a neat carpeted room, with more plants in it than were quite convenient, a coloured print of Queen Caroline, several shells, a good many tea-trays, two stuffed and dried fish in glass cases, and either a curious egg or a curious pumpkin ... hanging from the ceiling.(ch. 37)

In the disorderly Jellyby ménage in the same novel, Dickens's passion for itemizing runs rampant: when the cupboards are opened, there tumbles out a phantasmagoria of objects, including bottles, caps, letters, forks, firewood, saucepan-lids, footstools, bonnets, books, dinner-mats, gloves and umbrellas (ch. 30). Such abundance of detail may sometimes be given to the reader out of Dickens's creative hyperactivity, but there is also a sense in which he placed faithfully on record an aspect of his age. Thanks to new methods of production, there were more objects in the settings of daily life than ever before, and no Dickensian description is more cluttered than some of the interiors that dazzle our eyes and confuse our minds as we examine Victorian photographs.

To turn from Dickens back to Jane Austen is to see that detail of this kind can be used very much more sparingly in the nineteenth-century novel, and, when it is used, can serve highly significant purposes. The pianoforte that arrives for Jane Fairfax in Emma, and the cross and chain that cause Fanny such heartsearching in Mansfield Park, are instances of objects introduced not merely in order to imitate the density of a mode of civilized existence in which the human body found innumerable extensions of itself in material objects. When Jane Austen invokes an object she has something more than mimetic ends in view. (Compare Fanny's cross and chain with the lockets worn by Miss Tox in Dombey and Son--objects that are gratuitous rather than functional.) And this difference between two novelists is not produced simply by the less cluttered tastes of the Georgian and Regency periods: it proceeds from a different conception of the role that objects can be called upon to play in the world created by a work of fiction.

These familiar examples suggest that different novelists make very varied use--varied in frequency and in kind--of references to material objects. Where does Hardy stand in this matter? He writes, of course, not of a single social class but of a society that in the entire range of his fiction includes rural labourers and their employers, professional men and the leisured classes; so it will not be surprising, insofar as his descriptions reflect the real world, to find some variation in practice. But there is, I think, a marked idiosyncrasy in his use of material objects, and in this respect he can be distinguished from other Victorian novelists who were his contemporaries or immediate predecessors. I have cited Dickens and Jane Austen as conveniently exemplifying a wide spectrum of possibilities. The example relevant to Hardy, however, is that of George Eliot, especially in Adam Bede. The suspicion on the part of one reviewer that she might be the author of Far From the Madding Crowd was not entirely absurd, though that novel would surely have been a distinctly odd successor to Middlemarch; and one may stand the notion on its head and suggest that certain passages in Adam Bede might almost have been written by Hardy himself. I am thinking especially of the well-known 'Dutch paintings' analogy in Chapter 17, and of related passages elsewhere in the same novel.

George Eliot praises there the 'faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence' provided by the Dutch artists--for instance, 'an old woman bending over her flower-pot or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light ... falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her'. George Eliot continues:
All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form: Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women and children—in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion but in the secret of deep human sympathy.

Hardy was expressing a very similar idea when he wrote in his diary that 'the beauty of association is entirely superior to the beauty of aspect, and a beloved relative's old battered tankard to the finest Greek vase'. Elsewhere in Adam Bede, George Eliot returns to the same theme: 'The secret of our emotions', she writes in Chapter 18, 'never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past: no wonder the secret escapes the unsympathising observer, who might as well put on his spectacles to discern odours.' Less abstractly, we are made to feel the difference between Adam's mother, who is preoccupied with 'little things' such as her 'blue-edged platters', and Hetty, who has 'no feeling at all towards the old house' (chs 20, 25). The old woman's world may be drastically circumscribed, and the Westminster Review is never likely to swim into her ken; but the quality of her feelings demands our admiration, as Hetty's detachment from and indifference to the past prompt our misgivings.

All of this Hardy would have heartily subscribed to, and did indeed subscribe to in his creative practice. His imagination works actively in the mental space between an abstraction and its everyday embodiment, moving freely in both directions; and this faculty enables him both to be on familiar terms with the past and to make it part of the living present. His interest in ghosts has often been noted; and a haunting is a simple if dramatic example of the past becoming vividly and concretely present. But he needs no ghost from the grave to set his imagination working: the most humdrum object will serve his purpose. In the 'personal notebooks' he records that his grandfather carried on smuggling in a small way in the opening years of the nineteenth century; wooden tubs were used to hold the spirits, and (he writes) 'I remember one of them which had been turned into a bucket by knocking out one head, & putting a handle.' The same tubs turn up again in the preface to Wessex Tales, where he comments, in a manner that suggests the oral historian rather than the writer of fiction, 'my informant often spoke ... of the horribly suffocating sensation produced by the pair of spirit-tubs slung upon the chest and back, after stumbling with the burden of them for several miles inland over a rough country and in darkness'. Hardy is able not only to write but to relive family history, and by extension part of the history of an epoch, through the associative power of a wooden bucket.

It is possible, I think, to distinguish at least four ways in which he makes use in his writings of the daily world of solid objects. The first, and the closest to the mainstream of English fictional tradition, is mimetic in purpose: the novelist names, perhaps with a certain arbitrariness, items in the imagined surroundings inhabited by his characters, including the clothes they wear. In a famous passage in her essay 'Modern Fiction', Virginia Woolf attacked the kind of novel whose characters are dressed, down to the last button, according to the fashion of the day; but most Victorian novelists, and indeed their Edwardian successors, showed no lack of faith in the power of the button and spared no pains in depicting it. At the beginning of his career, Hardy conscientiously practised the art of enumerative description. Take, for example, the account of Grandfather James in Under the Greenwood Tree:

... his stooping figure formed a well-illuminated picture as he passed towards the fire-place. Being by trade a mason, he wore a long linen apron reaching almost to his toes, corduroy breeches and gaiters, which, together with his boots, graduated in tints of whitish-brown by constant friction against lime and stone. He also wore a very stiff fustian coat, having folds at the elbows and shoulders as unvarying in their arrangement as those in a pair of bellows; the ridges and the projecting parts of the coat collectively
exhibiting a shade different from that of the hollows, which were lined with small
ditch-like accumulations of stone and mortardust. The extremely large side-pockets,
sheltered beneath wide flaps, bulged out convexly ...

and so on (ch. 3). We learn that Grandfather James, who must take his meals where he may, carries
sugar, tea, salt and pepper on his person, as well as stowing bread, cheese and meat among the hammers
and chisels which are the tools of his trade. We seem to have here a less feverishly compulsive, more
leisured and affectionate, but still recognizable version of the Dickensian catalogue: Grandfather James
acquires solidity through the material objects that attach to his person, or such at least seems to be
Hardy's aim. At the same time, the rendering of the topography of the old man's appearance--the
description of his coat, for instance, as if it were a landscape scarred by time--is unmistakably Hardyan.

As his technique develops, however, Hardy comes to abandon the catalogue or inventory as a means of
evoking the physical world. We find him very strikingly declining an obvious invitation of this kind,
twenty years after Under the Greenwood Tree, in chapter 52 of Tess of the d'Urbervilles. When the
Durbeyfield household goods are moved on Lady Day to Kingsbere, Hardy, as always, finds the
imagined spectacle of uprooted household objects deeply touching; but so far from enumerating, as
Dickens would surely have done, he singles out just one object for mention, 'the cooking pot swinging
from the axle of the waggon'. And even this is not an example of 'pure' description, for the cooking-pot,
which belongs to the hearth and the very centre of settled family life, undergoes something especially
grotesque and pathetic in its displacement. So far from giving us items from the material world with the
appearance of randomness or gratuitousness, Hardy cinematically selects an image of special and even
unique power, and allows no rival to diminish its effect. At such moments Hardy looks forward to
twentieth-century fiction--to comparable passages in, for example, Sons and Lovers and Dubliners.

Elsewhere in Tess [Tess of the d'Urbervilles], other objects are mentioned not for themselves but for
what may without undue pretentiousness be called their symbolic potency: Alec's cigar, Tess's boots, the
strawberry Alec takes from a hot-house and forces between her lips, the bloodstain on the lodging-house
ceiling, and many others. In Jude the Obscure, the world of objects plays a special role in relation to
the theme of what Hardy in his preface calls 'the war waged between flesh and spirit'. The pig's pizzle is
the most celebrated, or notorious, instance: 'it had been no vestal who chose that missile', Hardy writes,
and it was no merely realistic novelist who inaugurated a courtship with what he rather oddly calls 'the
characteristic part of a barrow-pig'. The pattern of subsequent references to black puddings, pork,
chitterlings and sausages--a vegetarian's nightmare--serves to underline Arabella's carnality in contrast
to elements in the natures of Jude and Sue; each allusion is justified in its context by the requirements of
realism, but nevertheless there is an overriding pattern of recurrent images. Later in the novel, Jude
makes and sells 'Christminster cakes', gingerbread models of the colleges; and even Arabella, whom one
would not have suspected of having a quick eye for emblematic devices, does not fail to grasp that they
are sad symbols of his baffled aspirations.

Hardy's last novel is full of objects, from the schoolmaster's piano and the village well that Jude looks
down in the opening chapter to the shabby books that look down on him as he lies dead on the final page.
But they are rarely if ever objects named simply for their own sake: it is their suggestive power that
earns them a mention, and their purpose is not, or not mainly, local and specific but is usually related to
the larger purposes of the novel. By this stage in his career Hardy seems almost incapable of seeing
things in themselves and for themselves. To quote, in order to adapt, a famous comment by T. S. Eliot:

In consequence of his self-absorption, he makes a great deal of landscape; for landscape
is a passive creature, which lends itself to an author's moods. Landscape is fitted, too, for
the purposes of an author who is interested not at all in men's minds, but only in their
emotions, and perhaps only in men as vehicles for emotion.

What Eliot says of landscape is worth pondering in relation to Hardy's use of material objects, passive
creatures that lend themselves to the mood of author and character.

Necessarily, my remarks on this first category of fictional objects, those existing to furnish the world of
the novel and to fill its empty spaces with the reassuringly familiar and the readily informative, have
drifted into the discussion of a second category: since that is the way in which Hardy's own practice
developed, it is not inappropriate that analysis should proceed in this way. That second category may be
summed up in a phrase from one of Vladimir Nabokov's late novels: 'transparent things, through which
the past shines'. Hardy wrote in 1919 that 'the characteristic of all great poetry [is] the general perfectly
reduced to the particular'. In his novels he had long before implemented this aesthetic principle, using
homely objects to suggest a whole mode of existence and the qualities associated with it. In the
conditions of rural life, these objects acquire added force from their sparseness as well as from their
 permanence: things last longer than men, and speak from one generation to another; and if the objects in a
Dickensian scene shout at us in an excited chorus, in Hardy they are more likely to speak singly in a
quiet but unignorable voice. Even in the transient world of furnished lodgings encountered briefly in
Tess and more extensively in Jude [Jude the Obscure,], where Hardy seems closer to Gissing than to
George Eliot, an occasional object makes itself heard, like the dog-earned classical texts already
mentioned: it was not only in a churchyard that Hardy could hear 'voices'.

In the scenes of rural life, however, common objects take on a force that, again, reminds us of the
seventeenth-century Dutch painters. In his own 'Turkish Painting of the Dutch School' (the subtitle of
Under the Greenwood Tree), Hardy identifies the 'large nail, used solely and constantly as a peg for
Geoffrey's hat' in the course of his description of the gamekeeper's cottage. 'Solely and constantly' is a
phrase that carries due weight: it is not for nothing that the phrase 'to hang one's hat' has acquired
proverbial status, and Hardy is very good at evoking a way of life in which objects and routines trivial
in themselves become endeared, and hence important, through long habit. As in the poems written after
Emma's death, the trivial can in retrospect become of overwhelming importance. In this way man is able
to escape the bondage of the present and to make the past part of his living experience. Dickens makes
the same point towards the end of David Copperfield, which of all his novels is the one most deeply
concerned with the past. Peggotty, the only surviving link with David's early childhood, is seen with 'the
old ... workbox, yard-measure, and bit of wax-candle ... , that had now outlived so much' (ch. 56), and
clearly for the hero-narrator these commonplace objects have a special potency and poignancy.

Moreover, the past can extend beyond the individual life to include dead users of an object who still
seem to touch it with long-practised ghostly fingers, as in Hardy's fine poem 'Old Furniture':

I see the hands of the generations
That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations,
And with its ancient fashioning
Still dallying:
Hand behind hands, growing paler and paler ...

In another poem, the odd and highly characteristic 'On an Invitation to Visit the United States', he
states as a reason for wishing to stay in England (which, unlike America, is full of the dead--'scored with prints of perished hands') that he can there

Give past exemplars present room,
And their experience count as mine.

Hardy longed to see a ghost and did not leave it entirely to chance: he was addicted to revisiting, most famously in the Cornish pilgrimage after Emma's death, and as late as 1924, in his mid-eighties, he went (as he recorded in his notebook) 'In car with F[lorence] to the barn at the back of Kingston Maurward old manor house, where as a child I heard the village young women sing the ballads.'

But one of the main uses of 'little things' in Hardy's fiction is to show not continuity but disruption. Long before his time, agrarian and economic upheaval had established this as a notable poetic theme. Wordsworth's Michael offers a well-known instance and in its earlier portions evokes a way of life in which a few familiar objects endow life with a comforting sense of permanence, while its closing lines record unsentimentally their vanishing. John Clare spoke for the uprooted in more personal accents:

Dear native spot: which length of time endears ...
Nay, e'en a post, old standard, or a stone
Moss'd o'er by age, and branded as her own
Would in my mind a strong attachment gain,
A fond desire that they might there remain;
And all old favourites, fond taste approves,
Griev'd me at heart to witness their removes.

The 'strong attachment' to common objects imposed by 'length of years' is a favourite Hardyean theme, and he finds a source of powerful feelings in witnessing their 'removes'. The felling of a tree which brings about a man's death in The Woodlanders aptly dramatizes the spiritual effects of such ruptures of memory and association. In this and other respects, Jude the Obscure represents an extreme development of a motif that recurs almost throughout Hardy's work. Its wistful opening chapter is a record of change in the village and the destruction of a historical past that is also the personal past of its inhabitants--demolished houses, felled trees (again), 'obliterated graves' now 'commemorated by eighteenpenny cast-iron crosses warranted to last five years'.

Sometimes, however, the force of change--what Hardy in The Return of the Native calls 'the irrepresible New'--works the other way round: people change, objects remain unchanged, and the collision of the two is pathetic or ironic. In The Woodlanders (ch. 6), Grace Melbury returns from boarding school to find her old home the same and yet irretrievably different:

When dinner was over Grace took a candle and began to ramble pleasurably through the rooms of her old home, from which she had latterly become well-nigh an alien. Each nook and each object revived a memory, and simultaneously modified it. The chambers seemed lower than they had appeared on any previous occasion of her return, the surfaces of both walls and ceilings standing in such near relations to the eye that it could not avoid taking microscopic note of their irregularities and old fashion. Her own bedroom wore at once a look more familiar than when she had left it, and yet a face estranged. The world of little things therein gazed at her in helpless stationariness, as though they had tried and been unable to make any progress without her presence. Over
the place where her candle had been accustomed to stand, when she had used to read in bed till the midnight hour, there was still the brown spot of smoke. She did not know that her father had taken especial care to keep it from being cleaned off.

In this passage Hardy seems to be exposing some of his own most intimate feelings; and, as if to confirm this, the next paragraph makes an abrupt movement of withdrawal: the quiet, unaffected voice of feeling in the passage I have quoted is replaced by one that is stiffly formal and continues, absurdly, 'having concluded her perambulation of this now uselessly commodious edifice...'. Grace sees things not for themselves, as a stranger might, but for their place in her life; and there is a subtle complexity in the interplay between observation and memory: 'Each nook and each object revived a memory, and simultaneously modified it.' The pathetic fallacy is characteristic: 'the world of little things' gazing 'in helpless stationariness' is echoed in 'After the Last Breath', the touching poem Hardy wrote just after his mother had died, where he writes that in the uncleared sickroom

The lettered vessels of medicaments
Seem asking wherefore we have set them here;
Each palliative its silly face presents
   As useless gear.

And there is, of course, irony in Mr Melbury's well-meant effort to preserve the past unchanged: the change is in Grace herself, the past (as Hardy says elsewhere) 'past recall'. The 'brown spot of smoke' and other familiar signs belong to a way of life she has already lost or renounced.

This example from The Woodlanders, somewhat akin perhaps to a Joycean epiphany, has something in common with the next category I want to propose, in which an object is associated with a moment of intense feeling or a state of mind abnormally heightened. This category of fictional moment can be illustrated by quitting Hardy for long enough to recall a fine passage in Conrad's 'Typhoon'. Captain MacWhirr, we have learned in the story's opening sentence, is an unremarkable man, 'ordinary, irresponsible, and unruffled'. But fate subjects him to experiences that make unprecedented demands upon his undeveloped imagination, and Conrad shows that it is, paradoxically, only through the familiar 'world of little things' that a realization of the immense power of the typhoon comes home to him. When he returns to the chart-room, he finds it in disorder and notices that

his water-bottle and the two tumblers had been flung out of their stand. It seemed to give him a more intimate knowledge of the tossing the ship had gone through. ... And his table had been cleared, too: his rulers, his pencils, the inky stand--all the things that had their safe appointed places--they were gone, as if a mischievous hand had plucked them out one by one and flung them on the wet floor. The hurricane had broken in upon the orderly arrangements of his privacy. This had never happened before, and the feeling of dismay reached the very seat of his composure.

A moment later, it is a box of matches that enables MacWhirr to apprehend the possibility of his own death: by (literally) grasping the matches in order to replace them on their appointed shelf he grasps an idea hitherto beyond his speculative powers:

... before he removed his hand it occurred to him that perhaps he would never have occasion to use that box any more. The vividness of the thought checked him and for an infinitesimal fraction of a second his fingers closed again on the small object as though it had been the symbol of all these little habits that chain us to the weary round of life.
'Little things' and 'little habits' that in normal circumstances provide the reassuring sense of an orderly world subject to human control: these are the instruments by which is brought home to MacWhirr an awareness of calamity beyond imagination. Hardy's characters encounter no typhoons: their ordeals are on a more intimate, local and domestic scale. But he was no less aware than Conrad of the importance of 'all these little habits that chain us to the ... round of life', as well as of the way in which common objects can assume roles of great potency when the mind and feelings are assailed by exceptional experiences.

There is a good example of the latter when Gabriel Oak awaits Bathsheba's reply to his proposal of marriage: during the long moment that will determine the course of his future life, 'he regarded the red berries between them over and over again, to such an extent that holly seemed in his after life to be a cypher signifying a proposal of marriage' (Far From the Madding Crowd, ch. 4). Hardy here goes beyond the simple notion that the common holly berries acquired for Gabriel an almost hallucinatory power during that brief momentous passage of experience: he shows that the association, the chance yoking of two unrelated areas of experience, became a permanent part of Gabriel's mental world. Hardy's term 'cypher', less familiar than Conrad's 'symbol' (the matchbox is a 'symbol of all these little habits'), seems to be used in the sense of 'symbolic character' or 'hieroglyph' (though the OED gives no instance of the word in this sense later than the seventeenth century), or perhaps in the sense of 'secret code'. There are also more profound differences between the two passages: the Hardyan principle is metaphorical, the Conradian metonymic; and while for Captain MacWhirr the matchbox represents a homely summation of the long process of living, for Gabriel the holly berries stand not at the end but at the beginning of a sequence of experience, and he sees them as if seeing them for the first time.

**Far From the Madding Crowd** is a novel exceptionally rich in simple objects that take on a heightened significance: Bathsheba's Valentine, Troy's sword, the 'gargoyle' that pours its stream on Fanny's grave, the women's clothes found, disturbingly, in Boldwood's cupboards, are some of the most memorable examples. I would like, however, to spend a little longer on Gabriel's holly berries, because they will serve to remind us of an aspect of Hardy's art highly relevant to the present topic but too large to receive more than a mention. I have in mind the relationship of his fiction, and indeed his whole characteristic mode of perception, to the visual arts and especially to certain schools of Victorian painting. Carol Christ has reminded us that the connection between sharply observed detail and abnormal states of consciousness is important in Victorian aesthetics. The minor Pre-Raphaelite painter James Smetham wrote that the stanzas about the shell in Tennyson's *Maud* depict faithfully an unvarying condition of a mind in anguish, viz., to be riveted and fascinated by very little things. Tennyson's exiled hero finds his attention distracted from his huge despair by a tiny object lying at his feet; the poet's own gloss on this passage explicates the symbolic function of 'the shell undestroyed amid the storm'. Discussing Holman Hunt's 'The Awakened Conscience', Ruskin made a point very similar to Smetham's:

> Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent or distressed excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart.

Victorian narrative paintings are full of common objects depicted with photographic exactness, and very frequently they are given poignancy by their presence at some event of crucial importance to human lives. One recalls the row of cabbages hung from the side of the boat in Ford Madox Brown's 'The Last of England', and Brown himself spoke of 'the minuteness of detail' in his painting as 'bringing the pathos of the subject home to the beholder'. In his own strongly visual fiction--and not only in his fiction, for
again such examples as the medicine bottles in 'After the Last Breath' come to mind--Hardy shows that he has absorbed the lessons of these Victorian painters and explored ways of transposing them into the sister art of literature. There is an interesting parallel to Gabriel Oak's holly-berries in a familiar Pre-Raphaelite poem, D. G. Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge':

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory;
One thing then learned remains to me--
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

The passage quoted earlier from Conrad's 'Typhoon' in fact illustrates not one but two uses of common objects, and it is worth distinguishing them carefully. In one case the object is associated with a moment of special intensity, in the other it is perceived differently as a result of powerful feelings unrelated to it but proceeding from some exterior cause. In both cases the presence of the object is in a sense random or accidental; and yet, as with Tennyson's shell, the mind has instinctively seized upon an object that possesses symbolic appropriateness. The second of these uses is powerfully exemplified by a passage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. 'Phase the Fifth--The Woman Pays' opens with Tess having just concluded her confession to Angel. Hardy then turns from his heroine to her immediate surroundings, and shows how Tess's confession has transformed for her not only the human situation but the external world:

... the complexion even of external things seemed to suffer transmutation as her announcement progressed. The fire in the grate looked impish--demoniacally funny, as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it too did not care. The light from the water-bottle was merely engaged in a chromatic problem. All material objects around announced their irresponsibility with terrible iteration. And yet nothing had changed since the moments when he had been kissing her; or rather, nothing in the substance of things. But the essence of things had changed.

Everything had changed, yet nothing had changed, says Hardy; but his resolution of this paradox seems only to make it more puzzling. 'The substance of things' was unchanged, and presumably this refers to the world of fenders, water-bottles, and other such objects; but the 'essence of things' has changed, and this must mean the consciousness of Tess and Angel, including their awareness of the world of objects. There is, it seems, a curious shift in this passage from verbs that concede that we modify the appearances of objects according to our own mental states ('seemed', 'looked') to verbs that imply at any rate figuratively that these objects possess some Dickensian autonomy ('grinned', 'engaged', 'announced'). There is something puzzlingly tautological about Hardy's use of the pathetic fallacy: the fire looks 'as if it did not care in the least about her strait'--but then whoever in his senses supposed that it did? Hardy feels constrained to tell us it might have cared in order to insist on its indifference, to indulge in the pathetic fallacy only in order to reject it in favour of the apathetic truism. The impish or demon-like quality is a projection of a human observer upon inanimate objects, though on the question whether that observer is Tess or Angel or the narrator Hardy does not unambiguously commit herself. Still, it is characteristic of his commitment to the potency of common objects that he should find it worth saying that the fender 'did not care' about Tess's plight; and one wonders whether there is any other Victorian novelist who could have written that startling sentence about the 'light from the water-bottle ... engaged in a chromatic problem'.

The passage from *Tess* is more briefly paralleled in *Jude the Obscure*: when Jude returns to his room, and his abandoned studies, after an outing with Arabella, 'a general consciousness of his neglect seemed
written on the face of all things confronting him. There is also a striking passage in *The Woodlanders* (ch. 24), when Grace goes out of doors very early in the morning (as Tess was also later to do):

The tree-trunks, the road, the out-buildings, the garden, every object, wore that aspect of mesmeric passivity which the quietude of daybreak lends to such scenes. Helpless immobility seemed to be combined with intense consciousness; a meditative inertness possessed all things, oppressively contrasting with her own active emotions.

The commonplace world seems enchanted: again we notice that curious Hardyan registering of surprise at the 'passivity' and 'immobility' of the world of objects. In all three of these passages, that world is conveyed through the consciousness of a protagonist--Tess, Jude, Grace--at a moment of special significance.

A. J. Guerard has suggested that Hardy wanted to avoid 'the banality of exact observation', and nearly everything I have said on this subject bears out his suggestion. Hardy was a man 'who used to notice' things, but in the imaginative world of his fiction and poetry he is habitually engaged in something more idiosyncratic than a cataloguing of the multiplicity of the material world. In the ways I have sketched, and no doubt in others, he shows the intimate relationship existing between man and the objects that surround him: a relationship not fixed and stable but apt to be modified by present experience as surely as it involves a past that is also continuously present.

Hardy's mother, Jemima Hardy, we are told, was 'a woman with an extraordinary store of local memories'. For all her son's ambitious efforts to desert the local for the metropolitan and to exchange a world of objects for a world of ideas, the 'world of little things' retained a permanent hold on his imagination; and it was one of the not-so-little ironies of his life that he wrote most movingly and memorably when he put aside his hard-won learning and uneasy-worn social savoir-faire and unashamedly indulged a sensibility that apprehended both present and past through common objects. He confuses their power in his preface to *The Trumpet-Major*, where he speaks of various 'casual relics' of the Napoleonic period: bullet-holes in an outhouse door, the ruins of a beacon-keeper's hut, the 'lingering remains' of weapons and uniforms. Such surviving fragments, he adds, 'brought to my imagination in early childhood the state of affairs at the date of the war more vividly than volumes of history could have done'. One feels that the superiority of local objects to 'volumes of history' was not necessarily a conviction that the adult Hardy would have rejected as childish. Often, it is true, he associates attachment to the world of objects with the simple and the unlettered, as George Eliot did with Adam Bede's mother. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (ch. 18), Mrs Cuxsom reports the deathbed wishes of Susan Henchard:

'Yes,' she says, 'when I'm gone, and my last breath's blowed, look in the top drawer o' the chest in the back room by the window, and you'll find all my coffin clothes: a piece of flannel--that's to put under me, and the little piece is to put under my head; and my new stockings for my feet--they are folded alongside, and all my other things. And there's four ounce pennies, the heaviest I could find, a-tied up in bits of linen, for weights--two for my right eye and two for my left,' she said.

These practical arrangements have enabled the dying woman to come to terms with the idea of her own passing, and it is in similar terms that Mrs Cuxsom herself is enabled to grasp the termination of the individual life: "Well, poor soul; she's helpless to hinder that or anything now ... and all her shining keys will be took from her, and her cupboards opened; and her little things a' didn't wish seen, anybody will
see ...'."

But the most significant feature of the whole episode is that, when the narrative voice comes to pronounce an epitaph on Susan Henchard, it speaks in terms that, in spite of the slightly pedantic display of archaeological information, curiously resemble those of the untutored: 'Mrs Henchard's dust mingled with the dust of women who lay ornamented with glass hairpins and amber necklaces, and men who held in their mouth coins of Hadrian, Posthumus, and the Constantines' (ch. 20). Mrs Cuxsom and the narrator alike find an intimate association between mortality and what the former calls 'little things', and Hardy himself evidently finds it moving to contemplate the obstinate survival of these trinkets, the like of which are to be found in almost any local museum.

Notes


2. F. E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy (1962) pp. 120-1.

3. Richard H. Taylor (ed.), The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy (1978) pp. 8-9. Hardy records, characteristically, that the same grandfather used a joint stool to sit on when he played his cello at a Stinsford graveside (ibid., p. 4). One of Hardy's ideas for (presumably) an unwritten short story was 'The Autobiography of a Card Table' (ibid., p. 25).

4. The Life of Thomas Hardy, p. 281.

5. Personal Notebooks, p. 84.


8. Ibid., p. 62.

9. Ibid., p. 62.


11. The Life of Thomas Hardy, p. 321.

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