

NATURE QUESTIONED: ON TWO POEMS BY THOMAS HARDY

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Abstract: The paper considers the problem of nature in two poems by Thomas Hardy, “In a Wood” and “Nature’s Questioning”, placing them in the context of Hardy’s novelistic output, with special reference to The Woodlanders and Tess of the D’Urbervilles. It examines the tension between Romantic and Darwinian perceptions of nature in the novels, and suggests that this ambivalence is largely resolved in the poems, which negate Romantic attitudes and take a more clearly Darwinian stance. In particular, “In a Wood” cancels the opposition nature vs. city, while “Nature’s Questioning” denies the possibility of communication between nature and man.

Keywords: Victorian Literature, Thomas Hardy, Romantic and Darwinian Perceptions of Nature

ПРИРОДАТА ПОД ВЪПРОС: ДВЕ СТИХОТВОРЕНИЯ НА ТОМАС ХАРДИ

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Резюме: Настоящата статия изследва проблема за природата в две стихотворения на Томас Харди, „В една гора“ и „Питането на природата“, като ги поставя в контекста на романовото творчество на автора и по-специално „Горските жители“ и „Тес от рода Д’Ърбървил“. Тя разглежда напрежението в романите между романтически и дарвинистки нагласи към природата и изказва тезата, че в стихотворенията тази двойственост до голяма степен бива заменена от по-ясна дарвинистка позиция, като романтическият поглед бива отхвърлен. „В една гора“ отменя опозицията природа/град, а „Питането на природата“ отрича възможността за диалог между природата и човека.

Ключови думи: викторианска литература, Томас Харди, романтически и дарвинистки нагласи към природата

In addition to his novelistic output, in the latter part of his career Thomas Hardy was an extremely prolific poet. While the *oeuvre* of any author who divides their creative energies between different genres will show suggestive interconnections, in Hardy’s case the traffic between prose and poetry was extremely close. Segments of novels and individual poems seem to have grown out of each other; they echo, cite, interrogate, and complement each other. Hardy himself described the process in terms of the transmutation of identical substance when he spoke of poems that “were turned into prose”¹; of “reflections and sentiments” in novels that

¹ Hardy, T. Preface to *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. – In: *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. Ed. J. Gibson. – London: Macmillan, 1979, p. 6.

were “the same in substance” as those in some of the poems, and of poems “dissolv[ed] into prose”². The poem “Proud Songsters”, for instance, virtually repeats the opening of chapter XX of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and characters from *Under the Greenwood Tree* migrate into “Friends Beyond”. The poem “A Practical Woman” counters the story “An Imaginative Woman”³; and characters from the novels whose perspective is mediated by an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator speak in their own voice in poems like “Tess’s Lament” or “The Pine Planters” (spoken by *The Woodlanders*’ Marty South).

This complex relationship of mutual confirmation and contestation is especially interesting where the cornerstones of Hardy’s artistic platform are concerned, such as the moot issue of nature – the status nature is given in his writing and the role it plays in the world of his characters. Hardy’s imaginative engagement with nature is a vast and complicated topic; what this paper sets out to do is explore questions of nature in two poems, “In a Wood” and “Nature’s Questioning” (first published in 1898) in the context especially of two of the novels, *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891). “In a Wood” refers to *The Woodlanders* directly – it is subscribed “See ‘*The Woodlanders*’”; “Nature’s Questioning” raises the problem of nature particularly explicitly; and the bucolic *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* consistently places nature at the centre of the narrative. More specifically, the paper will focus on the interplay in these texts of two competing sensibilities – what we may broadly describe as the Romantic and the Darwinian conception of nature.

In both *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, the protagonists are presented as Romantic figures endowed with a keen, vibrant sensitivity to their natural environment and a sense of kinship with it. Giles Winterborne lives in a continuous “intelligent intercourse with nature” and the “wondrous world of sap and leaves”⁴. What others see as the perplexing “hieroglyphs” of the forest world, to Giles is “ordinary writing” whose letters he reads unerringly – he can tell a tree species from the touch of its twigs on his face in the dark, or from the sound of the wind in its branches⁵. Possessed of such “sympathy”, Giles the tree-whisperer performs the operation of planting as if he were “caress[ing]” the sapling’s roots, yet giving them a firm hold against future storms⁶. In cider-making season, he is the embodiment of plenty – with his face burnt to the colour of wheat, with “his boots and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips”, Giles “look[s] and smell[s] like Autumn’s very brother”⁷. The echoes from Keats’s “To Autumn” are unmistakable – Hardy’s description, like the Romantic’s poem, celebrates nature at its most benevolent and bountiful, lingering on the season’s “mellow fruitfulness”, on the “maturing sun” and the slow, honey-like “oozings” of the cider-press⁸. Ultimately, Giles’s very death takes place among the trees that survive him thanks to his care, and transforms the forest into “a house of death”⁹. This death, premature and needless in terms of plot, is given a certain dignity through

² Hardy, T. Prefatory Note [1912]. – In: Hardy, T. *Desperate Remedies*. – London: Macmillan, 1960, p. vi.

³ Richardson, A. Hardy and Biology. – In: *Thomas Hardy: Texts and Contexts*. Ed. P. Mallet. – Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 161.

⁴ Hardy, T. *The Woodlanders*. – London: Macmillan, 1990, p. 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 292, 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸ Keats, J. “To Autumn”. – *Project Gutenberg*: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23684/23684-h/23684-h.htm#Page_137 (last access: 25.05.2023), ll. 1–2, 22.

⁹ Hardy, T. *The Woodlanders*, p. 289.

the allusion to Milton's *Lycidas* and the tradition of pastoral elegy, in which the shepherd, as Northrop Frye points out, is presented not as a mere individual but as "a representative of a dying spirit of nature"¹⁰. When Giles dies, the forest is "pervaded by loss" and "the copses seem [...] to show the want of him"¹¹.

In her turn, Tess Durbeyfield is repeatedly identified with plants and animals – her entire character, David Lodge suggests, is "defined and justified" by such metaphors¹². She is also persistently shown to be at one with her natural environment – e.g. "On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene"¹³. These twin aspects of Tess's being are both spectacularly at work in chapter XIX, where Tess moves through the overgrown garden "stealthily as a cat", drawn "like a fascinated bird" by the sound of Angel's playing, her very body marked by the vegetation's juices and stains¹⁴. The sense of unity in the scene is underscored through the suggestion that even inanimate objects have acquired the power of sensation, and that the distinction between near and far is dissolved; through pathetic fallacy ("the weeping of the garden's sensibility") and the synaesthetic blending of colour and sound¹⁵. More generally, too, the novel repeatedly describes life shared by man and animal, and the close bodily contact between them. The horse that powers the butter-churn in chapter XXI seems just as dismayed as the farm workers that the butter won't come; and during milking, the dairymaids' and dairymen's faces are pressed close against the cows' flanks, so that when one of them speaks in chapter XVII, the voice seems to proceed from the cow's belly. The picture of Tess herself, milking Old Pretty, is a pink-and-white "cameo cut from the dun background of the cow"¹⁶. In addition, nature in the novel holds a supreme regenerative and restorative power for the individual – a power they could not resist even if they wanted to because, in Wordsworthian terms, it is "[a] motion and a spirit, that ... rolls through all things"; because to take joy in one's being and in all being is part of "Nature's holy plan"¹⁷. After her trials in Phase the Second, the "stir" of a new beginning moves Tess just as it moves the budding plants and the wild animals; the "invincible instinct towards self-delight" that "pervades all life" also animates her¹⁸. Finally, as in the Romantics' imagination, so in Hardy's novel nature provides solace and shelter from the ills of the human world. When Tess runs into the forest in chapter XLI, she does so to escape just those "evil tongues" and "sneers" that Wordsworth found nature sustained him against¹⁹.

¹⁰ Frye, N. *Literature as Context: Milton's Lycidas*. – In: Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake. Ed. A. Esterhammer. – Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 24.

¹¹ Hardy, T. *The Woodlanders*, p. 289.

¹² Lodge, D. Tess, Nature and the Voices of Hardy. – In: Lodge, D. *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*. – London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 173.

¹³ Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁷ Wordsworth, W. *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*. – Project Gutenberg:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12145/12145-h/12145-h.htm#section2> (last access: 25.05.2023), ll. 100–102; "Lines Written in Early Spring". – Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10219/10219-h/10219-h.htm#section20> (last access: 25.05.2023), l. 22.

¹⁸ Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, pp. 112, 113, 119.

¹⁹ Wordsworth, W. *Tintern Abbey*, ll. 128–129.

Along with these distinctly Romantic affinities, however, in both *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* the vision of nature is compounded with strong Darwinian elements. Hardy's stance is ultimately ambivalent; in Lodge's succinct formulation, Hardy was unable to "decide whether the pathetic fallacy was fallacious or not"²⁰. The bond between man and nature, between the human animal and other animals, is in the end precarious at best, and is not necessarily endowed with spiritual meaning. And if, according to her "holy plan", nature administers regeneration, she also – and just as unerringly – administers suffering; if she can nurture the smallest particle of new life, so can she indiscriminately annihilate it. In *The Woodlanders*, the forest world with which Giles is in such sympathy is, in fact, the site of violent strife. As "overcrowded" as any city slum, it is marked by the same fierce competition, which ensures the survival of the fittest – branches "rub[...] each other into wounds", lichen eats "the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangl[es] ... the promising sapling"²¹. In more than just the tradition of pastoral elegy, then, the forest is the "house of death"; in more than the liturgical sense, in the midst of life we are in death. Nature's health-giving power is negated by her potential to check growth and generate disease – leaves in the forest are "deformed", curves are "crippled", new shoots are "interrupted"²². The opposition of nature vs. city, crucial to the Romantic imagination, is cancelled too, making void nature's promise of solace and sustenance against the suffering inflicted by the human world. In stark contrast with the Romantics' nature, Hardy's forest is all matter and no spirit; and the effect of materiality is doubled through language that likens vegetation to the human body – "huge lobes of fungi" grow on trees "like lungs" and "rotting stumps ... ris[e] from their mossy setting like black teeth from green gums"²³. The personification here does not suggest a harmonizing correspondence but works as part of a naturalist aesthetic of morbid corporeality.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, too, the Romantic sympathy which fuses Tess's being with that of the overgrown garden also has less optimistic Darwinian undertones. Tess as a cat or bird is, after all, a creature of mere instinct, a biological automaton – she acts without any "conscious[ness]", without any "determination" of her own²⁴. How passive and helpless one is before the dictates of the sex instinct is made blatantly obvious in the description of the dairymaids' bedchamber, which presents the girls as tiny cogs in a vast biological machine. Hopelessly in love with Angel, they all "toss[...] and turn[...] on their little beds", "writh[ing] feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law" – an emotion which "they had neither expected nor desired", and which cancels all individual difference, reducing each of them to "but portion of one organism called sex"²⁵. The "irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure" is not necessarily benign, it does not necessarily work in the individual's favour – the dairymaids' ecstatic sexual "joy" is "killing" them²⁶. Nature's power to brace and restore, then, can double as a power to distress and destroy. The principle of "normative felicity", the emphasis on "a deep association of life and pleurability" which, Gillian Beer suggests, was central to Darwin's thought and

²⁰ Lodge, D. *Tess, Nature and the Voices of Hardy*, p. 175.

²¹ Hardy, T. *The Woodlanders*, pp. 34, 65.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 276.

²⁴ Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p. 138.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 162.

profoundly influenced Hardy²⁷, assumes here a distinctly malign form. Furthermore, both the Romantic and the Darwinian view on nature involve a perception of the oneness of all living beings²⁸, but this oneness assumes a different shape. In the Romantic imagination, man's intercourse with nature is "self-affirming"²⁹, and the conscious oneness results in spiritual transcendence; in the aftermath of Darwin, the unconscious oneness cancels the self and reduces it to shared materiality.

The suggestion that Tess, like the dairymaids, is partly a biological automaton is consistent with the idea of nature's indifference to her, and logically extends to the idea of the dispensability of any one individual. Tess may be at one with her natural environment, but it remains alien to her experience – it does not "darken[...] because of her grief, nor sicken[...] because of her pain"; her entire being is "of no [...] consequence" to it³⁰. And in the description of summer's progress in chapter XX, despite its overall positive tenor, there is a certain weariness at the relentless repetitiveness of nature's cycle: "Another year's instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches [...] took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place"³¹. The word "instalment" thrusts the world of modern production into the natural world, stressing both the mechanicalness of the process and the materiality of the product; nature appears here, in Tom Paulin's phrase, as a massive "conveyor belt"³². There is something slightly frightening about such bounty, which is very different from the bounty of autumn in Keats's poem. Keats's autumn is an artisan, Hardy's summer is a manufacturer – its output is impersonal and overwhelming.

The Woodlanders and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, then – and Hardy's novels in general – oscillate between a Romantic and a Darwinian treatment of nature. Setting alongside them "In a Wood" and "Nature's Questioning", we find that those ambivalences are largely resolved in the poems – partly, no doubt, due to the exigencies of concentrated form. Both poems take a distinctly Darwinian stance. They are Darwinian, to begin with, in their close concern with what Beer defines as the twin problems posed by evolutionary theory, of "find[ing] a scale for the human, and a place for the human within the natural order"³³. "In a Wood" revisits the relation between the natural order and the human/social order; "Nature's Questioning" revisits the epistemological relation between nature and man.

"In a Wood" thrusts us back into the overcrowded, violent forest of *The Woodlanders* in order to undermine the opposition of nature vs. city even more explicitly and categorically. The poem begins by recreating a classic Romantic plot: the speaker goes into the wood seeking to heal his "[c]ity-opprest" spirit, dreaming of "sylvan peace" – a phrase reminiscent of Keats's

²⁷ Beer, G. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 232.

²⁸ Indeed, in Beer's reading of the garden scene, Tess's experience of fusion is Darwinian rather than Romantic in origin – see Beer, G. *Darwin's Plots*, p. 239.

²⁹ Brown, D. Victorian Poetry and Science. – In: *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Ed. J. Bristow. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 143.

³⁰ Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, pp. 103, 120.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³² Paulin, T. *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception*. – Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975, p. 63.

³³ Beer, G. *Darwin's Plots*, pp. 235.

quiet “[s]ylvan historian”³⁴ – that will provide “soft release / From men’s unrest”³⁵. He goes into the wood “[a]s to a nest”, replicating Tess’s escape into the forest, where she “mak[es] a sort of nest”³⁶ for herself (a gesture that identifies her with the birds she shares the forest with). Instead of Wordsworthian “tranquil restoration”³⁷, however, the speaker in Hardy’s poem finds in the wood a bloody battlefield – the trees are involved in fierce rivalry that makes the forest world too much like the human world. In this battle, the “slim sapling” and the “stout and tall” elm alike fall, negating even the principle of the survival of the fittest/largest – combat seems to be governed by chance alone. Finding no peace or “sweet comradeship”, and realizing that the trees can teach him no “grace”, the speaker, in an anti-Romantic twist, turns away from them to return to the city. The Romantic conviction that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her”³⁸ has proved false, along with the moral opposition between the natural and the human world – humanity is as “[w]orthy” as the trees, the speaker concludes ironically. In fact, not only does the natural world mirror the human world of selfish strife: it is a more debased version of the human world, where “at least smiles abound” and where one may even chance on “[l]ife-loyalties”. Hardy thus rewrites the human world, which to Wordsworth is a place of “greetings where no kindness is”³⁹, into a place where kindness *is*. And indeed, in *The Woodlanders* rivals Grace and Mrs Charmond find themselves locked in an embrace to ensure mutual survival when they get lost in the wood at night, while the forest world of “In the Wood” is one of unassuaged warfare.

As the speaker’s departure suggests, his awareness of the condition trees and humans share ultimately results not in sympathy but in alienation. (Tess, by contrast, is moved by the suffering of the injured birds, with which she feels a deep fellowship, and puts them out of their misery.) Likewise, the recognition of the similarity between the natural and the human/social order fails to produce a sense of unity – it merely blurs the borders. Metaphor in the poem, too, continuously shifts between the personifying and the animistic. At the beginning, the speaker hopes to find among trees “comradeship” and “[n]eighbourly” kindness, as well as a “nest” for himself; he then describes the trees “shoulder[ing]” each other and inflicting on each other “black despair” and a Hamletesque “[s]ting [of] “scorn”. At the end, he once again reverts to natural imagery to present the appeal of the social world: human conversation “trills” as birds do. Thus, although the speaker’s dream of a “nest” is frustrated, Romantic longing lingers for a paradise that never was.

If the image of the violent forest in *The Woodlanders* draws on Darwin’s Tree of Life⁴⁰, this can also be extended to “In a Wood”. Where Darwin used the simile of the tree to illustrate a literal truth, Hardy adopted the simile and made it literal; he also made it grimmer. In Darwin’s tree, the green young branches represent existing species, and the far more numerous decayed ones represent extinct species – indeed, the ground beneath the tree is thick with dead branches.

³⁴ Keats, J. “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. – *Project Gutenberg*: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23684/23684-h/23684-h.htm#Page_113 (last access: 25.05.2023), l. 3.

³⁵ All references to the poem are to the text given as definitive in *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. Ed. J. Gibson. – London: Macmillan, 1979, pp. 64–65.

³⁶ Hardy, T. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, p. 296.

³⁷ Wordsworth, W. *Tintern Abbey*, l. 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 122–23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 130.

⁴⁰ Beer, G. *Darwin’s Plots*, p. 233.

The growth of this tree is anything but harmonious – as young twigs spread out, they try “to overtop and kill” their rivals; even so, the passage concludes with a sense of wonder at the “ever branching and beautiful ramifications”⁴¹. The conclusion to *On the Origin of Species*, too, sees “grandeur” in the view of life that acknowledges the necessity of “the war of nature”, of “famine and death”⁴². But if Darwin’s vision of nature alternates between pessimism and optimism⁴³, and if “a terrible beauty is born” from the Tree’s fierce struggle⁴⁴, Hardy’s sylvan battlefield contains no compensations. Death and destruction are merely death and destruction: nothing is born of them. From a Romantic *locus amoenus*, the poem’s forest is transformed into a *locus terribilis*.

“In a Wood”, whose first draft was probably written after *The Woodlanders* was completed⁴⁵, acts as a coda to the novel. Where the novel is ambivalent in its treatment of nature, the poem amplifies the Darwinian element, while negating the Romantic vision and reducing it to a vague unfulfillable longing. It becomes a brief Darwinian postscript, which in its pessimism goes beyond Darwin, and which is all the more powerful because it is brief.

“Nature’s Questioning” complicates the relation between man and nature even further, picking up and elaborating the suggestion that trees have no grace (or anything at all) to teach humankind. The poem casts nature – trees and fields and pools – as a group of “chastened” schoolchildren huddled together, “overborne” by an oppressive schoolmaster⁴⁶. In their helplessness, the children turn to the speaker with a series of questions about their origin and purpose. They propose four different versions of God, wondering which one governs their existence; but the speaker is unable to answer their questions and, indeed, does not respond at all: “No answerer I”. The poem thus undermines two traditional narratives at the same time. First, it sustains the Biblical myth of man being given dominion over nature, only in order to question it – lacking answers himself, man is deficient as custodian. Far from being endowed with the power to name (nature), man is mute. Second, the poem reverses the Romantic hierarchy according to which nature speaks to man and acts as a guide, as a conduit to superior knowledge and a source of prophecy, while man assumes the role of supplicant. In the poem, nature’s speech is reduced to “lippings mere”, to a series of helpless questions; while man is exalted from supplicant to mediator – to a sort of teacher’s assistant, almost, whose silence replicates that of the teacher and makes him of his party. And, again, man’s silence marks him as feeble and dull. The deep communion of man and nature, celebrated by the Romantics, thus degenerates into a series of mumbled questions and an awkward silence.

What are the four versions of God that the poem proposes? The first is “some Vast Imbecility” which has the power to create, but not to take care of its creation, leaving it to “hazardry” (the word evokes the word *husbandry* only to deny it). The second is “an Automaton / Unconscious of [nature’s] pains”. The third is a “Godhead dying downwards, brain and eye

⁴¹ Darwin, C. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. – London: John Murray, 1859, pp. 129–130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 490.

⁴³ Beer, G. *Darwin’s Plots*, p. 107.

⁴⁴ Richardson, A. *Hardy and Biology*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Pinion, F. B. *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy*. – London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976, p. 22.

⁴⁶ All references to the poem are to the text given as definitive in *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. Ed. J. Gibson. – London: Macmillan, 1979, pp. 66–67.

now gone". The fourth is "some high Plan", according to which Good "storm[s]" Evil but, equally, "Achievement strides" over "Forlorn Hope". These versions of God are all deficient and all negate the "holy plan" of Romantic vision. The first version lacks a capacity for thought and order; the second lacks sentience and is blind to nature's suffering; the third is pathetically helpless and, having no brain or eye, lacks both thought and awareness; the fourth, though it does involve a "high Plan", is morally ambiguous. This degradation of nature and God is anti-Romantic, but it is also specifically Darwinian. The first version of God reminds us of the fact that extinct species far outnumber existing ones, and of the role of chance in evolutionary process – in Darwin's Tree of Life, a weak branch may be "favoured" and survive "by some chance"⁴⁷. The second version highlights blind instinct; and the fourth highlights the fierce competition underlying evolution – in the Darwinian world, the winner takes it all.

The unsettling of traditional relations, in fact, begins with the poem's ambiguous title – the syntax of the phrase, as John Paul Riquelme points out, makes it an amphiboly⁴⁸. Two readings are possible here: questions are asked *by* nature or questions are asked *of* nature. The poem clearly supports the first reading; yet the questions asked also highlight the uncertainty of nature's status – they interrogate nature. In other words, questions are asked on two levels at the same time, but only to be met by a double dumbness – the shared dumbness of nature and the human speaker, each of whom is ignorant and/or silent. Hardy's illustration in the original edition of *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* – a drawing depicting a broken key – drives the point home: communication between nature and man is radically impossible; nature's meaning is radically inaccessible.

Darwin's evolutionary scheme, Beer reminds us, offers "no privileged place to the human" but "bare equality"⁴⁹. Though Hardy's poem appears to place man in a privileged position and to subordinate the rest of nature, the privileging is dubious – man, after all, is "[n]o answerer". Man as a figure of authority and insight proves just as inadequate as God in any of the four versions. Man and the rest of nature are ultimately reduced to the same level, to the same state of unknowing, thus confirming the Darwinian principle of bare – and blind – equality.

"Nature's Questioning", "In a Wood", *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Woodlanders* – each of these four texts is central to Hardy's vision of nature, so what does their comparative reading show? The novels, far larger in scope, offer space for complexity and oscillate between a Romantic and a Darwinian vision; the poems' concentrated form, by contrast, forces Hardy to reduce the complexity and favour one of the sides. Confronted with this choice, Hardy adopts the Darwinian point of view. These brief, stripped-down texts act as postscripts to the novels, and their authority cannot be ignored. The pattern can be extended to Hardy's work as a whole – virtually all of his novels feature a tug of war between Romantic and Darwinian views on nature; while, I would suggest, a great many of his major poems on nature ultimately adopt the

⁴⁷ Darwin, C. *On the Origin of Species*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Riquelme, J. P. The Modernity of Thomas Hardy's Poetry. – In: *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. Ed. D. Kramer. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 205.

⁴⁹ Beer, G. *Darwin's Plots*, p. 233. The phrase "bare equality" is a quotation from Hardy's *The Return of the Native*.

Darwinian view⁵⁰. If, as mentioned earlier, Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* could not decide “whether the pathetic fallacy was fallacious or not”⁵¹, we need equally to keep in mind that *the pathetic fallacy* was a product of the Victorian age to begin with. In coining the phrase, Ruskin was proposing – despite his own “intense [...] love of nature” – that “the poetic bond between psychological states and natural conditions, for so long the stock-in-trade of poetry” had to “be broken in the modern sceptical age”⁵². Thomas Hardy’s work is informed by the same spirit of regretful scepticism, and his poetry especially severs the connection with particular – and poignant – force.

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⁵⁰ The set includes “To Outer Nature”, “The Pine Planters”, “The Year’s Awakening”, “Heredity”, “The Pedigree”, “A Backward Spring”, “Proud Songsters”, and “I Watched a Blackbird”, to cite but a few. Each of these reflects a disenchanting view of nature, or registers an uncertainty as to the ultimate purpose served by living beings, or focuses on the impersonal – and often destructive – automatism of natural processes.

⁵¹ **Lodge, D.** Tess, Nature and the Voices of Hardy, p. 175.

⁵² **Richards, B.** Nature and Science. – In: Richards, B. *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830–1890*. – London and New York: Longman, 1992, p. 186.

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