Thomas Hardy and Aspects of anti-Romantic Ornithology

The second chapter of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) shows the eponymous hero in a cornfield hired to chase the greedy rooks off the furrow lines with the aid of a rattle. The longer he frustrates the birds' desires, the more he feels inclined to give up his antagonism towards these fellow creatures and even begins to grow "sympathetic" to their lot: "A magic thread of fellow-feeling united his own life with theirs" (Hardy 1998a, 15). In line with Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, who, after showing aggression and hostility towards animals, painfully learns to love every unit of God's creation, Jude goes so far as to see a reflection of his own unwanted and meaningless existence in the insignificance of the birds' lives. This delicate and Romantic bond between human being and animal is suddenly disrupted when Farmer Troutham (whose nominal affiliation with fish is deceptive) pounces on Jude and punishes him for his commiseration with the birds.

Startled out of his juvenile belief in a sympathetic co-existence between man and animal, Jude cannot help being disconcerted by his sudden insight into one of the major "flaw[s] in the terrestrial scheme," into the shattering fact that "what was good for God's birds was bad for God's gardener" (16). Thus, what Jude learns in an almost Joycean epiphany is that the time-honoured Romantic idea of harmonious holism is illusive and that man's relationship with animals is not only that of a dualistic opposition, but also indicative of a philosophy that emphatically stresses man's (and essentially each creature's) loneliness in a hostile and bitterly ironic universe. Seen from this perspective, the butt of criticism in Hardy's fiction and poetry is not only the moral constraints of the Victorian age, but also the myths of the Romantic period that people in their late 19th-century nostalgia were reluctant to give up. The persistent image of the bird, which appears in several novels and poems and reveals the author's profound ornithological interests, is thus highly fraught with intertextual meaning and allows Hardy to set about the project of deconstructing the lingering ghost of Romanticism before the end of the Victorian age.

I.

One of the most memorable depictions of birds in Hardy's œuvre can be found in the poem "The Darkling Thrush" (1900), which clearly invites the audience to read the verses against the backdrop of Romantic poetry. From the liminal perspective of a spectator or "fence-sitter" who leans both on a "co ppice gate" and, according to Tom Paulin, "towards the positivists' camp" (Paulin 1975, 44), the speaker of the poem describes the landscape as an eerie underworld in which everything has been turned into tints of "spectre-gray" (2) (Hardy 1991, 150). Apart from the fact that in this ghostly atmosphere man no longer roams the countryside in a Wordsworthian man-
ner, but “haunt[s]” it (150), there are two strikingly Romantic images which make it more than obvious that the poem is meant to be a belated but all the more devastating response to the Romantics’ idealism. The “tangled bine-stems” that score the sky “[l]ike strings of broken lyres” (5-6) are not only inverse references to the many Eolian harps conjured up in Romantic poetry, but also to the “tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean” in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (Shelley 1986, 577-579). What makes Shelley’s ode so complex is that, in the second stanza, he intricately combines images of music with ideas of architecture. The wind as the “dirge / Of the dying year” is closely related to the clouds as “the dome of a vast sepulcher” (l. 7), and thus the reader is suddenly reminded of an awe-inspiring ecclesiastical construction which translates the speaker’s apocalyptic visions both into sounds and stone-like solidity.

Comparing the two poems, the reader is made aware of the fact that Hardy seems to be intent on re-writing Shelley’s poem, especially when he equates the wind with a “death-lament” (12) and imagines the overcast sky as a “crypt” with its “cloudy canopy” (11). But in sharp contrast to Shelley, who sees the winter-induced torpor only as being temporary and transforms the corpses of the wintry leaves into “winged seeds” (l. 7), Hardy depicts nature in a state of irredeemable rigor mortis and noticeably foregrounds the fact that the Shelleyean seeds are dead and the “ancient pulse of germ and birth” (13) has stopped beating. It is an example of modernist irony that, into this Beckettian atmosphere of endgame barrenness and death-like paralysis, Hardy introduces a bird, which at first, as in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” or Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” is only audible:

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\begin{align*}
\text{At once a voice arose among} \\
\text{The bleak twigs overhead} \\
\text{In full-hearted evensong} \\
\text{Of joy illimit[.]} \\
\end{align*}
\] (Hardy 1991, 17-20)

One characteristic feature of the various birds in Romantic poetry is that they are invisible. As a mediator between the world of “lead-en-eyed despairs” and the realms of the “Queen-Moon,” Keats’s nightingale soothingly reminds the poet of his duty to transcend his earth-bound and moribund existence (Keats 1987, 146-348: “Ode to a Nightingale,” l. 28, 36). In accordance with the Platonic underpinning of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” the bird is rather a disembodied idea, an everlasting voice that could be heard in “ancient days by emperor and clown” (l. 64) and inspired William Butler Yeats to translate it into verbalised enamel. To make the Romantic birds’ liminality even clearer, Shelley stresses the skylark’s spirituality by comparing it to “an unbidden joy whose race is just begun” (Shelley 1986, 602-603: “To a Skylark,” l. 15). Like in Keats in the “Ode to a Nightingale,” Shelley uses many similes to underscore the fact that the bird is beyond description, that its song eludes expression in words and can only be vaguely characterised by surprising image clusters: “Like a glow-worm golden / In a dell of dew, / Scattering unbeholden / Its aerial hue […]” (l. 46-49).

Like Shelley’s “scorn of the ground” (l. 100), Hardy’s bird is at first only an echo of the supernatural. But what the speaker in his meditations on death and vacuity hears is so astonishingly out of tune with the desolation of the scene that the reader is at first led to believe that the poem falls into two parts: one fin-de-siècle part of twilight disintegration and one part consisting of epiphanic reverberations of mystical joy. This effect is, however, shockingly destroyed when the bird is not so much kept in the sphere of heaven as ironically shown in its physical vulnerability:
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom. (Hardy 1991, 21-24)

Differing blatantly from the notion of Romantic birds as timeless symbols of inspiration, as teachers of "harmonious madness" (l. 103), Hardy's thrush is terrifyingly subject to the ravages of time and deeply involved in nature's downward movement from senility ("[t]he weakening eye of day," 4) to putrefying death ("[t]he Century's corpse outleant," 10). When the bird, in its wind-swept fragility and old age, has eventually chosen to resist the growing gloom, the effect is parodic and suggestive of an existentialist resilience in the face of all-encompassing doom. Thus, the bird's free choice of singing, its almost Sisyphean way of challenging the ontological darkness with musical vestiges of the religious and monastic tradition ("evensong" as a synonym for vespers, "ecstatic sound," and "carolings") fail to reach the speaker. Far from being instructed or inspired by the bird and its leap of faith, the speaker cannot help emphasizing the unbridgeable dichotomy between his brooding reflectiveness and the bird's unaccountable knowledge of "[s]ome blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware" (31-32).

II.
In 1887, Hardy published his Poems of Pilgrimage, in which his persona adopts the attitude of Byron's Childe Harold and muses on the jarring difference between Italy's glorious past and its prosaic and dreary present. On their "long-contemplated visit to Italy" (Millgate 2004, 259), Hardy and his wife Emma stopped in Genoa for two nights, but, as he wrote in the poem "Genoa and the Mediterranean," Hardy was grieved to find that the beauty of the superba was impaired by "squalid undress" and many other "dream-endangering eyewounds" (Hardy 1991, 100: "Genoa and the Mediterranean," l. 17-18). A similar Byronic response to Italy is elicited from him, when he visits Viareggio or Leghorn, the small Tuscan city on the Ligurian Sea where Tobias Smollett died, many British Romantics used to stay and Shelley composed his ode "To a Skylark" in 1820. It is here that Hardy wrote the poem "Shelley's Skylark," which, in its sarcasm, clearly expresses the realist's aversion to the Romantic's concepts of idealism. Not following Oscar Wilde, who during his 1882 tour of Italy dedicated a poem to Shelley's grave and thus showed himself familiar with the Romantic feeling of weltschmerz ("Ah! sweet indeed to rest within the womb / Of Earth [...]" Wilde 1998, 28: "The Grave of Shelley," l. 9-10), Hardy concentrates on the death of Shelley's skylark, on the corporeal disintegration of a bird that the Romantic poet explicitly wanted to see as being dissociated from the ornithological conditions of life: "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert" ("To a Skylark," l. 1-2). Opening his poem on a note of indefiniteness, Hardy's speaker, in the role of a disillusioned pilgrim of Romantic sights, not only stresses the skylark's insignificance, but also mocks at the incommensurable impact it had on a poet's imagination:

Somewhere afield here something lies
In Earth's oblivious eyeless trust
That moved a poet to prophecies –
A pinch of unseen, unguarded dust[.] (1-4)
The wreck of Romanticism and the end of its short-lived myths and legends seem to be epitomised in a nondescript "something," in a "pinch of unseen, unguarded dust." The immense chasm that opens between the poet's high-flown prophecies (which rhyme inadequately with "lies" in its ambivalent twofold meanings) and the fact that the bird has dwindled almost to nothingness gives the poem a mock-heroic tone, a scoffing Byronic note of nihilism. Wrapped in the illusions of his idealism, the Romantic poet refuses to see what is more than evident to subsequent generations of realists and positivists: that the skylark "only lived like another bird, / And knew not its immortality" (7-8).

Even though Shelley and Keats seem to be "pre-eminent in Hardy's poetic pantheon" (Millgate 1985, 260), the poet, who had just published the grimly tragic novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (in which "a weak bird sing[s] a trite old evening song" in anticipation of Henchard's decline; Wilson 2003, 4-5), is eager to attack the Romantics' inclination for investing quotidian things with a supernatural aura. For Hardy, who is as averse as is Sue Bridehead to plastering over natural phenomena with "abstractions" (Hardy 1998a, 152), a bird is nothing but a bird which

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\text{Lived its meek life; then, one day fell –} \\
\text{A little ball of feather and bone;} \\
\text{And how it perished, when piped farewell,} \\
\text{And where it wastes, are alike unknown. (Hardy 1991, 9-12)}
\]

While for Hamlet there is special providence even in the fall of a sparrow (*Hamlet* V, 2, 197-198, in Shakespeare 2006, 448), Hardy is unwilling to accord anything outstanding to the bird's "meek life." The fall of this "little ball of feather and bone" is not only unknown, but it also bathetically clashes with the Romantic semantics of soaring ("Ecstatic heights," 24) and the millennial aspirations Shelley and his contemporaries propagated. Thus, this verse is particularly illustrative of the jarring polarities which divide Hardy's works and extend Persoon's "table of binary oppositions" by the category 'height' versus 'depth' (Persoon 2000, 32). Laconically comparing the death of the little skylark to the dropping of a ball, devoid of any eschatological implications, Hardy in his sobering view of the Romantic period is more in line with Giacomo Leopardi than with Shelley, whose fall and bodily reduction to a pinch of ashes on the shores of La Spezia seems to be ironically mirrored in the decomposition of the bird.

The first half of the poem, lines 1 to 12, provide a graphic description not so much of the bird's "wonder" (Harris 1978, 171) as of its physical and ludicrous insignificance, of the disproportionate relationship between the Romantic's vision of the bird and its rather shabby and unsubstantial ornithological existence. The second half of the poem (lines 13 to 24) focuses on the speculative afterlife of the bird and, in its shift from past to tentative present and future, moves from the facts of harsh reality to the category of fantasy and romance, a genre that Hardy pitted against the light of reason and associated with foolish characters, such as Tess's mother, Joan Durbeyfield. The threefold (and anaphoric) repetition of "maybe" in stanza four highlights the speaker's vague belief that the bird's dust can possibly be found "in the loam I view" (13), "in the myrtle's green" (14) or "in the coming hue / Of a grape" (15-16).

But these lines of hypothetical guesswork, which are strongly imbued with Romantic

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1 Hardy also referred to Shelley as "that greatest of our lyrists" (Page 2001, 397).
2 See Lennartz (2009).
pantheism, are succeeded by an exhortation that is directed at fairies and that, in its futile attack on the bounds of 19th-century realism, is reminiscent of the tone of implausibility in John Donne's song "Goe, and catche a falling starre:"

\begin{quote}
Go find it, faeries, go and find
That tiny pinch of priceless dust,
And bring a casket silver-lined,
And framed of gold that gems encrust
And we will lay it safe therein,
And consecrate it to endless time. (17-22)
\end{quote}

In his essay on Hardy's poems, Ian Ousby writes that "Shelley's Skylark ends with a fantasy in which the bird's corpse is discovered and paid appropriate reverence" (Ousby 1979, 54). What Ousby fails to take into account, though, is the fact that the poem is made up of ironic contrasts and contradictions that undermine any attempt to pay due reverence to Shelley and to enshrine the bird in the 19th century's cultural memory. The "tiny pinch of priceless dust" (18) has not only fallen into utter oblivion, but it also contrasts so blatantly with the ornamental abundance that the shrine is imagined to display that the reader is led to the assumption that Hardy sees Romantic idealism (or at least its neo-Romantic yearning for it) on a par with Catholic idolatry: much decorative ado about nothing. Once again, Hardy's speaker is playing the role of Byron's Childe Harold whose quest for the shrine was similarly illusory and severely clashed with a reality that was in a constant process of dilapidation and decay. Faced with the absence of both the shrine and the bones and having to deal with a speaker who craves assistance from fairies, Ousby suddenly (and not very comprehensibly) transfers his argument to a metapoetical level: "the shrine is the poem itself" (Ousby 1979, 54).

This solution, which seems to revert to the architectural imagery in the etymology of the word 'stanza' (as the Italian word for room), has a certain attraction if one does not heed too much the (at times crude) lines, which, in this context, would have to be seen as a rather longish epitaph. Assuming a mock-heroic tone, the epitaph to the (missing) bird's dust is iconoclastic in two respects: it dismantles the entire concept of Romantic inspiration and it exposes to ridicule the idea of the poet as an enraptured bard, because the "[e]cstatic heights" of Shelley's thought are unsparingly juxtaposed to the skylark's disconcerting evanescence:

\begin{quote}
For it inspired a bard to win
Ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme. (23-24)
\end{quote}

III.

Hardy's critical view of Shelley,\footnote{Harold Bloom holds that Hardy's "misprision of Shelley, his subversion of Shelley's influence, was an unconscious defense" – a hypothesis, or one of Bloom's outstanding misreadings, which is hardly convincing if one considers to what extent Hardy assaults the Romantic's remoteness from reality (Bloom 2003, 24).} the Romantic age and its transcendent birds, however, not only permeates some of his best-known poems: it is also prevalent in his late novels, which contain harsh comments on Romanticism and its manifold "[c]harmed magic casements" ("Ode to a Nightingale," l. 69) of escapism. In Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891), the eponymous heroine is not only constantly surrounded by birds, but more than once she is compared to or imperceptibly transformed into a bird which is
not worshipped, but in constant danger of being trapped, limed or caged. For the understanding of the novel, it is certainly interesting to remember that Hardy generally saw human life from a theriomorphic perspective, and *sub specie avis* in particular. In an 1885 entry in his diary, Hardy refers to all humans as caged birds with the difference only lying in the size of the cage.\(^4\) When Tess is employed by the d’Urbervilles to take care of the blind lady’s fowl and to entertain the birds with the whistling of tunes, she is hardly aware of the fact that she is a caged bird herself being whistled to by her fraudulent cousin and later tormentor. And thus, it does not take long before her bird-like existence is exposed to the predatory desires of Alec who pretends to save her from the brawling women, "the screaming cats" (Hardy 1998b, 68), only in order to entrance her and, like a more dangerous feline creature, to track her down in a place appropriately called The Chase. The fact that the rape of Tess takes place under "primæval yews and oaks," in whose branches "were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap" (73-74), and that the act of sexual aggression is – in an intertextual allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* – referred to as a fatal encounter between the hissing serpent and the sweet birds sufficiently indicates that Tess’s avian life is devoid of Romantic idealism. Writing in the wake of Darwin’s attack on traditional anthropology, Hardy provocatively depicts pastoral life as a jungle in which birds have lost their Romantic implication and are, like Byron’s white “bird of promise” (and parody of Coleridge’s albatros) in the shipwreck scene in *Don Juan* (*Don Juan* II, 95, 754, in Byron 1986, 125), solely seen in terms of fodder for the more rapacious beasts.

In the third chapter of the novel, titled "The Rally," Tess is again given theriomorphic qualities and related to birds when she enjoys the "bird’s-eye perspective" of the valley (103), the biblical Pisgah view, for the very last time. Hoping to escape the cage of moral censure into which Alec’s rape has thrust her, Tess descends into the verdant Froom valley, an apparently Arcadian place where the idea of plenty and overflowing fertility strangely contrasts with the image of Tess as a fly “on a billiard-table of indefinite length” (105) which, in a world of predators and victims, is intensely watched by "a solitary heron" (105). To what extent this confrontation between the fly and the heron is emblematic and a foreshadowing of Tess’s later fate is made evident by the fact that her caged existence as Alec’s kept mistress terminates in an expensive lodging-house called The Heron.

As Nicolas Poussin shows in his picture *Et in Arcadia Ego* (*The Shepherds of Arcady*; 1638-1640) – a painting which Hardy (as an exhibition-goer and art connoisseur) must have been aware of –, Arcadian situations always contain the seeds of their own destruction: each Arcadia from Poussin to Keats’s "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is threatened by mutability and mortality. Thus, this is consistent with the fact that, right from the beginning, Hardy’s Arcady is associated with witchcraft, superstition and disharmony. The mystical silence of nature is thus disrupted by Angel Clare’s poor performance as a harpist, and the result is that Tess is so spellbound that, "like a fascinated bird" (122), she is hypnotically attracted to his jarring music. While Romantic birds never came into contact with the dissonance of reality and remained in their realms of idealism, Tess, the entranced bird, is suddenly flung into a world of crude corporeality, whose passions not only expose her to

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myriads of other predators, but also elicit predatory desires in her and reveal that, in the lost paradise of Hardy’s Arcady, the limed bird also has feline qualities:

She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made blood-red stains on her skin.[.] (122-123; emphasis in original)

In contrast to the ornithological poems which emphasise the idea of paucity and absence, the (real and metaphorical) birds in *Tess* are not only conspicuously numerous and versatile, they are also part of a natural voluptuousness and pan-sexualism that have a Keatsian ring of pain and transitoriness. In accordance with the manifold expressions of circularity in the novel, Hardy's nature must be understood in terms of anti-Romantic seasonal wheels that relentlessly bring forth and crush animals and human beings alike. Images of "profusion of growth," which are to be found in this pivotal chapter, are thus inextricably combined with ideas of sexual wounds and death and show Romantic aspirations to the ideal for what they are: illusory, utopian and out of touch with Hardy's biological pessimism. Seen from this perspective, what could be more outrageously anti-Romantic, on the one hand, than to state in a poem that the lives of skylarks are subject to a wheel of generation which eventually reduces everything to dusty nothingness; and, on the other, to indicate in the novel that nightingales are the result of "inorganic particles" that thrive for a short period of time and then meet with annihilation?

Another year's instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others stood in their place when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles. (128; emphasis in original)

In the context of this concept of life progressing by instalments, by an endless succession of "ephemeral creatures," Tess's shortlived amorous idyll at the dairy farm is, like all phenomena, subject to a blind circuituous mechanism that affects vegetation and animals alike. In order to stress the idea of life's relentlessly mechanical circularity, Hardy's narrator draws the reader's attention to post-Romantic birds that have almost become wheels, to herons that move their heads "round in a slow, horizontal, passionless wheel, like the turn of puppets by clockwork" (131).

The extent to which Hardy's novel is an anti-Romantic manifesto can be ascertained in almost every major part. While the peak of the summer season, the "Thermidorean weather" (149), is – apart from the terminology dating from the French Revolution – described in Romantic terms ("the oozing fatness," "the rush of juices" and "the hiss of fertilization," 149), which are reminiscent of the procreative processes in Keats's ode "To Autumn," Tess's angelic lover is clearly identified as a "Shelleyan" character who is too little rooted in earthly matters: "his love [was] more especially inclined to the imaginative and ethereal" (192). Angel's confrontation with Tess thus mirrors Shelley's encounter with the skylark: like the bird, Tess is corporeal and, although she differs substantially from Arabella Donn, the epitome of nature in *Jude the Obscure*, she cannot conceal the fact that she is "but portion of one organism called sex" (147). In the same way as Shelley denies the skylark its physicality, Angel idolises Tess as an ancient goddess (more Artemis than Demeter), as an Arcadian maid and as a concept of chastity that – like Shelley's skylark – crumbles to ashes, to
"extinct embers" (235) in the fireplace, as soon as it comes into contact with harsh reality. The reference to the dead autumnal leaves that are suddenly stirred to "irritated resurrection" (218) and thus form a grim backdrop to Tess's devastating confession is another ironic indication of the fact that Shelley is most ambivalent and scarcely a "kind of secular Christ" for Hardy (Bloom 1980, 24) and that Shelleyan idealism is deemed no longer compatible with man's existence as "a wounded animal" (Hardy 1998b, 218). While Angel, in his fundamentalist ideas of femininity and angelic remoteness from life, prefers to see Tess as a deity, the narrator makes it abundantly clear that, in the context of 19th-century post-Darwinian debates, she is on the same level as a beast, running the whole gamut from a fly to a cat, but more often than not closely affiliated with birds (see also Asker 1980).

Left to her own devices as a fallen woman and abandoned animal, she is faced with birds on two memorable occasions: on her way to Flintcomb-Ash (a place that seems to translate Tess's ashen reality into spatial dimensions), she comes across several pheasants covered in blood and "writhing in agony" (Byron 1986, 278). While these birds symbolise Tess's life as a constant exposure to transgression and wounds and thus foreshadow her untimely end, the other "gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes" (288), those avian harbingers of Arctic temperatures, which she comes across on the flinty and frozen fields, seem to be a direct response to the Keatsian spell of sensual warmth that she enjoyed on the dairy farm and usher in the cold and infernal turn of her existence. Compared to "a bird caught in a springe" (291) Tess is flung from one hellish cage or trap to another. And what is grimly ironic is the fact that "the revolving wire-cage" (326) of the Plutonic threshing machine proves to be scarcely less detrimental and suffocating than the cage of gentleness at Sandbourne, "The Herons," where Tess is eventually tamed and dressed up as the ornamental angel in the house. Here, in the ambiance of a costly "Mediterranean lounging-place" (376), with its trimmed little lawns and cultivated rhododendron bushes, Tess's natural and animal-like beauty is done violence to for the second time. Having been put onto a pedestal of Greek asceticism before, Tess is now artificialised and put into the fetters of late Victorian fashion: "Her neck rose out of a frill of down, and her well-known cable of dark-brown hair was partially coiled up in a mass at the back of her head [...]" (378).

What makes Hardy's novel so bleak is the fact that the only means the protagonist has to attain her freedom, to escape the Ixionian wheel and her existence as "a caged bird" (381) is the desperate and fallacious idea to murder her captivator. The transitory freedom gained at the side of her Shelleyan husband-turned-pragmatist ends in Tess's Hamletian readiness to be thrust into the final cage of her life: the prison in the form of a "large red-brick building" with its "level gray roofs, and rows of short barred windows bespeaking captivity" (397).

IV.

The irresolvable dichotomy of Romantic idealism and down-to-earth pragmatism, of Shelleyan transcendence and the imperatives of the human condition continued to preoccupy Hardy many years after the publication of his much criticised late novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. In a short poem titled "A Bird-Scene at a Rural Dwelling," Hardy focuses on the complete estrangement between bird and

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5 References to ashes are striking, culminating in the allusion to Byron's *Giaour* that the pair were "but the ashes of their former fires" (Byron 1986, 236).
human being. When the "inmate" of the cottage wakes up ("A Bird-Scene at a Rural Dwelling," l. 1, in Hardy 1991, 701), the birds no longer address him, but "flee / To the crooked neighbouring codlin-tree" (5-6) and leave him to "the hammering clock within" (11) as it chimes five.

But what underscores the idea of the chasm between man and nature, between Romantic sentimentality and Victorian notions of commodification is the image of the caged (or wounded) bird. As an ironic comment on the position of the Icarian Romantic in a positivist and Darwinian age, which makes *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* an exceptionally ornithological novel, the chasm is also at the core of a poem which Hardy wrote towards the end of 1912 and, together with the "Bird-Scene at a Rural Dwelling," incorporated into the collection *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs, and Trifles* as late as in 1925, "The Bird-Catcher's Boy." In marked contrast to modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats, who in the first decade of the 20th century were in pursuit of new stanzaic structures and unsettling images, Hardy reverts to the antiquated form of the ballad. Hardy uses this Romantic genre, eulogised by Goethe as the "ur-egg of poesy" (Goethe 1970, 592) and distinguished by its alternation between dialogue and rugged narrative elements, to pinpoint the tragical incompatibility between the Romantic aspirations of youth and the mercantile reality that the older generation has consented to comply with. The poem begins with the boy's voice of protest at the callousness and lack of justification for his father's "trade" ("The Bird-Catcher's Boy," l. 1, in Hardy 1991, 825):

Father, I fear your trade:
Surely it's wrong!
Little birds limed and made
Captive life-long.
Larks bruise and bleed in jail
Trying to rise
Every caged nightingale
Soons pines and dies. (1-8)

The boy in his futile rebellion reminds the reader not only of little Jude taking pity on the blackbirds and jeopardising the farmer's profit, but he is also reminiscent of Tess sympathising with d'Urbervilles' caged birds and suffering from the restrictions that have been placed on her freedom. While the emphasis on the conflict between generations firmly establishes the poem in a Romantic tradition, the fact that the boy explicitly mentions larks and nightingales makes it more than apparent that the poem is another important part of Hardy's lifelong (and nostalgic) criticism of Romanticism. Flung into a technological and Daedalian age (in which the continental Futurists were extolling the beauty of machines and geometry), the boy is appalled to find that every Icarian attempt to rise meets with disapproval and that Romantic longings in a "tragic age" inevitably result in self-laceration and death.

Thus, it is the father's voice of commercial reason that not only labels the insurgent Romantic boy as "a dolt" (9), it also highlights the adult's belief both in vague concepts of necessity and in his son's submitting to his "lessons" (15):

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6 D.H. Lawrence, an ardent reader of Hardy, refers to his period as a "tragic age" at the beginning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Lawrence 2006, 1).
Don’t be a dolt, my boy!
Birds must be caught;
My lot is such employ,
Yours to be taught.

Soft shallow stuff as that
Out from your head!
Just learn your lessons pat,
Then off to bed. (9-16)

The fact that a bird can be more than a commercial article or even a symbol of the Romantics’ idea of lofty and fragile art is, from the father’s positivist perspective, “soft shallow stuff,” completely at variance with modern man’s self-fashioning as a solid and level-headed homo oeconomicus.

What is vaguely reminiscent of Goethe’s poem “The Erlkönig,” is the fact that the boy (called “Freddy” in line 26) seems to know that there is some hidden (and uncanny) meaning to the birds, “the caged choirs” (22), which the father, with his limited and commercially darkened perception, is not able to understand. Walking past the cages in the dark and unlit corridors, the boy produces music on the cages’ bars, which underlines his Romantic affinity with the birds:

Harp-like his fingers there
Sweep on the wires. (23-24)

Having temporarily transformed the cages into Eolian harps, the boy suddenly vanishes, leaving his parents “heart-sick” (35) and scarcely consoled by the birds which, in their Babylonian captivity, keep on singing. Reduced to despair by the boy’s absence, the parents are suddenly awakened to new hope, when, on a wintry night during “Christmastide” (41), they suddenly hear musical sounds coming from the birds’ cages:

[...] a groping touch
Dragged on the wires
Lightly and softly – much
As they were lyres[,] (49-52)

Their expectation of an epiphanic re-appearance of their son is, however, bitterly disappointed when they find that the “lyres” are nothing but liars, that the room is empty and they are faced not so much with the gospel of light and Christ’s birth as with the devastating news that in the night a vessel, “a hoy” (66), was shipwrecked,

And the tide washed ashore
One sailor boy. (67-68)

V.

Assuming that the sailor boy is Freddy and thus called upon to fill the narrative lacuna which the ballad teasingly offers, the reader can easily relate the boy to the various other Shelleyan characters in Hardy’s poetry and fiction who tragically fail to reconcile their Icarian aspirations to the demands of sordid reality. Seeming to invest the larks and nightingales with a higher meaning, the boy not only subverts his father’s mercantile intentions and lessons, he also craves Romantic heights that
eventually leave him bleeding on the thorns of life and, like the poet himself, "washed ashore" in a state of progressive corruption.

As if to expand on what he had written about man's ontological situation in his 1885 diary, in his late poems, Hardy seems to be eager to reveal what happens when the cage opens and both man and the birds manage to escape their existential dungeon. What is vaguely reminiscent of Tennyson's popular poem "The Lady of Shalott," which was illustrated by Hardy's contemporaries William Holman Hunt and John William Waterhouse and thus firmly rooted in the Victorians' cultural memory, is that the boy, like Tess and Jude, tries to leave the cage of his allotted existence and thus meets an untimely death. And while, at the end of his "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats is left in a precarious state of epistemological doubt, wondering whether the bird was "a vision, or a waking dream" ("Ode to a Nightingale," l. 79), Hardy's post-Romantic readers cannot help witnessing a relentless deconstruction of the birds once they have been permitted to leave their cages. Either they drop dead as little and insignificant "ball[s] of feather" and rot into dusty nothingness, or they challenge the growing gloom and sepulchral atmosphere around them, but make the "fence-sitter" and reader sadly aware of the fact that the thrush's Shelleyan attempt to defy the world's deadly paralysis might end as ignominiously as the skylark that unwittingly attempted to inspire a Romantic poet.

Thomas Hardy's fiction and poetry inaugurate the death of the Romantic birds in modernist literature and show drastically that sentimental sympathy with singing birds clashes with a new credo that triumphantly propagates the survival of the fittest and the advent of the carnivorous bête humaine. From this perspective, it is more than striking that, in James Joyce's 1914 poem "Tutto È Sciolto" from the collection Pomes Penyeach, the "birdless heaven" is particularly stressed (Joyce 1991, 55). If there are some birds that have survived Hardy's Romantic bird-bashing, such as the nightingale in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922), it is ultimately only the staccato shriek that, like a stentorian echo, is left of Philomel, "[s]o rudely forced:" "Jug, Jug to dirty ears" (The Waste Land II, "A Game of Chess," l. 100, 103, in Eliot 1989, 66). The bird's descent from ecstatic heights to the obscene depths of modernist urban life had by then come to an end and provided early 20th-century literature not so much with an ecological twist as with an image of the death of Romanticism. It would certainly take at least another essay to see whether D.H. Lawrence, in his neo-Romantic desire to re-connect man to nature, was ever able to resuscitate the birds (and the Romantic ideas) that Hardy, in a mood wavering between grim irony and nostalgia, had killed in his works.

Works Cited


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7 See also Lennartz (2011).


—. "'The Ache of Modernism': James Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach* and Their Literary Context." *James Joyce Quarterly* 47.2 (2011): 115-130.


