

A Dialogic Reverberation between Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and Shen Congwen's *Long River* (1938-45)

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ABSTRACT: Evidence shows that an influence study between Thomas Hardy and Shen Congwen is not as fruitful as a parallel study. With this in mind, this paper adopts Qi Shouhua's revision of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogic reverberations' to explore the shared dialectic between Nature and culture, shown through the use of both naïve and poetic languages, common to both Hardy and Shen's regional novels. The mediations between these two kinds of languages in the narratives and characterisations in Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and Shen's *Long River* (1938-45) dissolves the dichotomy between Nature and culture and connects modernity with a re-enchanted Nature. Through close comparison, this paper argues that the dialogic reverberations between these two writers reveal more about their novels than an analysis that reads the literature of each author in isolation.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Hardy, Shen Congwen, comparative literature, Nature



AS REGIONAL WRITERS, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Shen Congwen (1902-1988) both believe the particular could gesture toward the universal: through their representation of particular locales, namely Wessex and Xiangxi (West Hunan), both authors ultimately share what they believe to be universal concerns about the human condition in the face of modernity. In this respect, the particularity of the regional settings of their novels are of vital importance to the dialectic between Nature and culture upon which both authors maintain a focus, as a universal question at the core of both late-Victorian England and early modern China. Sudhir Dixit notes that Hardy, 'while depicting his characters and their inner-relationship with the setting, rises much above the narrow bounds of regionalism.'¹ Similarly, Jeffery Kinkley comments that Shen's Xiangxi novels 'interpret rural life in modern China as a whole, and even the existential plight of

¹ Sudhir Dixit and Alka Saxena, *Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001), p. 52.

twentieth-century man.² In order to build upon these ideas put forward by Dixit and Kinkley, and to extend beyond influence studies, this paper provides a comparative study that explores Hardy's and Shen's representation of Nature in their regional novels and examines how they address the roots of regional cultures and an encroaching modernity.

There is no evidence to suggest that Hardy ever visited China, and it is unlikely that his limited knowledge of Chinese culture was based upon fact. During the nineteenth century, perceptions of China—however erroneous—stemmed from the West's desire to construct the East, or the 'Orient,' as 'Other' and therefore as inferior to the West. China therefore became a repository for the qualities that the West wanted to disassociate with themselves, such as exoticism, decadence, sensuality, laziness, with these ideas ultimately rendering the people of China as void of individuality. It is these misconceptions that permeate literature of the nineteenth century. In Chapter Seven of *The Woodlanders* (1887), for example, Giles encounters, at a sale of trees and faggots, his fellow woodland men 'who on that account could afford to be curious in their walking-sticks'.³ The distortion of woodbine into walking-sticks is then related to an anecdote of Chinese culture, where it is stated that 'the Chinese have been said to mould human beings into grotesque toys by continued compression in infancy.'⁴ In 1891 and 1903, Hardy wrote two letters to Arthur Moule who worked as archdeacon in middle China, saying that he believed Moule's book *New China & Old* would sell widely because 'the subject of mission work in China has come to the front again,'⁵ and about Eastern religion he comments that '[i]t seems to me that the peoples of the East are so much older in religion than we of the west, that they must view our teaching thereon with something of the amused surprise of elders towards children's news & theories.'⁶ On 19th February, 1904, Hardy wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* in response to the comments about his *The Dynasts* (1903): 'Sir, your critic has humorously conducted his discourse away from his original charge against *The Dynasts* into the quaint and

² Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 4.

³ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887; London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 94.

⁴ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, pp. 94-5.

⁵ Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate eds., *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy, Volume Three: 1902-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 79.

⁶ Purdy and Millgate, I, p. 243.

unexpected channel of real performance by means of fantoccini, Chinese shadows, and other startling apparatus.⁷ A famous Chinese poet as well as Shen's friend, Xu Zhimo (1897-1931), visited Hardy at Max Gate in July, 1925, and Hardy asked him about the language and rhyme of Chinese poetry, about which he had little knowledge, and suggested that Chinese writers could try using English or French.⁸ By contrast, Shen read extensively about Western literature and he admired Charles Dickens.⁹ There is no evidence that he read Hardy, but translations of Hardy's works were quite popular in China in the 1920s so it is possible that Hardy was known to Shen.¹⁰ Moreover, it was Xu who introduced Hardy to Chinese readers. It is therefore unlikely that Xu never talked with Shen about his literary hero, and although no evidence has been found, it is likely that Shen read Xu's criticism and translations of Hardy which were published in major literary periodicals.¹¹

The model of 'dialogic reverberation' in Qi Shouhua's article on the comparative studies between Hardy and several modern Chinese writers offers a methodological approach with which to frame to this paper's comparison of Hardy and Shen. Drawing upon this approach allows this paper to foreground the shared concerns about 'connection' in two intricately inter-related periods of cultural history. Qi exemplifies the style of comparisons between Hardy and several modern Chinese writers in noting that: '[i]f the "kinship" between Hardy and Xu Zhimo has visible "veins" that can be traced, more or less, most other published articles interlinking Hardy and Chinese authors are in the broad sense of "dialogic reverberations" as postulated by Mikhail Bakhtin.'¹² According to Sigmund Ongstad, for Bakhtin, the term dialogue is '[u]sed as a metaphor for the general dynamics of aspects of utterances as compared to the static, closed

⁷ Harold Orel ed., *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1967), p. 144.

⁸ Han Shishan ed., *Complete Works of Xu Zhimo* (Beijing: Tianjin Peoples Publishing House, 2005), pp. 209-18.

⁹ See Shen Congwen, *Autobiography* (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1981).

¹⁰ He Ning, 'Hardy and China', *Foreign Literary Criticism*, 1 (1999).

¹¹ Xu's translations and studies of Hardy were mainly published on *Crescent Moon*, a literary journal he established with other writers in 1928 and was editor-in-chief until he died in 1931. Xu actually visited Hardy at Max Gate in 1926 and published a recollection article 'An Afternoon with Hardy' on his journal *Crescent Moon* (Volume One, Issue One, March 1928).

¹² Qi Shouhua, 'Anxiety, Angst, and the Search for Hardy's Chinese Tw[a]in', *Literature Compass*, Vol. 3., 2016, p. 153.

nature of sentences.¹³ Qi borrows from Bakhtin the term 'dialogic reverberations' to refer to comparative studies that can achieve a dialogue between literatures, but he neglects the potential of a comparative study between Hardy and Shen.

Building upon this potential, this paper focuses on the shared dialectic between Nature and culture which is present in both Hardy's *Return of the Native* and Shen's *Long River*. Postcolonialism and ecocriticism, two critical theories that concern the dichotomy between the self (the coloniser/Humanity) and the other (the colonised/Nature), are suggestive but inadequate to capture the reciprocity between Nature and culture that Hardy and Shen ultimately express through literature.¹⁴ In these novels, the dichotomy of the self and the other dissolves, becoming instead a dialectic between culture and Nature which makes use of poetic and naïve languages respectively. The 'naïve' refers to a sensory language that is largely based on rustic sensibilities and is rich in physical experience and impressions; the 'poetic' language, on the other hand, is abstract and attempts to comprehend the metaphysics and aesthetics of life. The dialectic between Nature and culture can be viewed as a dialectic between an unconscious, impressionist state and a conscious, reflective manner of writing in these novels. The way Hardy and Shen mediate between these two kinds of languages shows an attempt to connect the concrete with the abstract, and to retrieve connections between humanity and Nature when both are facing the alienation of modernity.

Raymond Williams's criticism of Hardy centres on a dichotomy between the customary and the educated which can be compared with the dialectic between Nature and culture that I raise in this paper. Williams insightfully points out that the problem of Hardy's style can relate to the unconsciously customary and the consciously educated languages of Tess, suggesting that, '[t]he truth is that to communicate Hardy's experience neither language would serve, since neither in the end was sufficiently articulate: the educated dumb in intensity and limited in humanity; the customary

¹³ Finn Bostad, Craig Brandist, Lars Sigfred Evensen and Hege Charlotte Faber (eds.), *Bakhtinian perspectives on language and culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 76.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the limited nature of postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to the comparative study between Hardy and Shen, see Yuejie Liu, 'Nature and Humanity: A Comparative Study between the Regional Novels of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Shen Congwen (1902-1988)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southampton, 2019).

thwarted by ignorance and complacent inhabit.’¹⁵ The combination of and the transitions between these two languages, however, can achieve compelling outcomes which will be demonstrated in my textual analyses. For Williams, Hardy stresses traditions and unchanged landscapes because they are part of the structure of his feeling; nevertheless, Nature is overridden by social relations which are shown by changes within rural communities. Although Williams contributes significantly to a contextual understanding of the economic and social aspect of Nature in Hardy’s novels, he rather ignores the poetic and philosophical aspect of Hardy’s writings about Nature. Following Williams’s Marxist criticism of Nature in Hardy, Terry Eagleton asserts it is through the body that Hardy achieves a transition between objective experiences and subjective consciousness: ‘[i]t would hardly exaggerate the novel’s purpose to say that the body itself becomes a mode of symbolic interpretation—a transitional point between the objective reality of Nature and purely subjective consciousness.’¹⁶ For Eagleton, the body is not only the focal point for the rapport between mind, body and environment but also ‘the socially visible aspect of men and women’, where there is an alienation between identity and society, or between ‘inward and objective modes of knowledge.’¹⁷ This is in line with Williams’s dualism of the customary and the educated. Through their Marxist analyses of Hardy therefore, Williams and Eagleton suggest that Nature is only important when it reveals alienated human conditions and it is always overridden by social relations. For Hardy, however, Nature means more.

Williams rightly observes that Hardy ‘sees as a participant who is also an observer [and that] this is the source of the strain,’¹⁸ whereas for Eagleton, ‘[t]he tension, rather, is in his own position, his own lived history, within a general process of change which could come clear and alive in him because it was not only general but in every detail of his feeling observation and writing immediate and particular.’¹⁹ Building upon these critical frameworks, I argue that Hardy and Shen deal with this strain and tension between the unconscious participant state of the ‘native’ and the reflective observer

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 107.

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, ‘Thomas Hardy: Nature as Language,’ *Critical Quarterly*, 13, 2 (1971), p. 157.

¹⁷ Eagleton, p. 160-161.

¹⁸ Williams, p. 110.

¹⁹ Williams, pp. 111-2.

state of the narrator (and writer) with a mediation between the naïve and the poetic languages, through which they search for connections of the two positions and try to dissolve the dichotomy between Nature and culture.

Both Hardy and Shen have claimed a rustic idiosyncrasy and sensibility which they relate to a native sense of belongings. In a letter to Richard Doddridge Blackmore in 1875 Hardy mentions: '[l]ittle phrases of nature which I thought nobody had noticed but myself were continually turning up in your book—for instance, the marking of a heap of sand into little pits by the droppings from trees was a fact I should unhesitatingly have declared unknown to any other novelist till now.'²⁰ Hardy attributes this shared knowledge to their shared origins in the West of England. Hardy claims in another letter to Kegan Paul in 1878 that his choice of residence in a London suburb is due to a careful consideration of his compatibility with the city: '[w]e might have ventured on Kensington, but for such utter rustics as ourselves Tooting seemed town enough to begin with.'²¹ These personal writings show that Hardy considers himself, even after his urban trainings as an architect, as thoroughly rustic. In the preface to *Selected Works* (1936), Shen also insists on his native Xiangxi identity and confronts his middle-class urban readers with his incompatibility with the city:

I am truly a countryman, which I do not mean to boast nor dispraise—a countryman as usual has a rooted rustic idiosyncrasy, with love and hate, grief and joy in their distinct forms, which are totally different from those of city dwellers. He is reserved, stubborn, earthy, not without sharp wit, but not treacherous. He is always earnest about things but may be too earnest so that he sometimes becomes clumsy and foolish.²²

Shen writes in response to criticism of his rural novels: 'I felt particularly isolated. There were too few countrymen. [...] Currently, though we have writers with a rustic background in China, most of them flatter your interests and attract your attention for career "success". There are not many countrymen who would remain so of their own accord.'²³ Similarly, after the popularity of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) was not as successful, and Hardy was uneasy about writing what the public deemed a rustic story: '[h]e perceived [...] that he was committed by

²⁰ Purdy and Millgate, I, p. 38.

²¹ Purdy and Millgate, I, pp. 57-8.

²² Zhang Zhaohe (ed.), *Complete Works of Shen Congwen*, Volume Nine (Beijing: Beiyue Literature and Art Publishing House, 2002), p. 3. All translations in this paper are by the author unless otherwise stated.

²³ Zhang, IX, p. 6.

circumstances to novel-writing as a regular trade, as much as he had formerly been to architecture; and that hence he would, he deemed, have to look for material in manners in ordinary social and fashionable life as other novelists did. Yet he took no interest in manners, but in the substance of life only.²⁴ By 'the substance of life', Hardy may refer to Nature, as he notes in a similar expression 'a going to Nature' in 1882:

As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.²⁵

This contrast between manners and the substance of life corresponds to the dialectic between culture and Nature in the works of both writers. After nearly two decades in major Chinese cities,²⁶ Shen still exclaimed: 'I discover that my life survives in the city as an empty shell. Like in a wasteland, all the intellectual seeds that have commercial values or the conceptual seeds that have moral values in the urban society cannot take roots and grow in me.'²⁷ On 21st August, 1888, Hardy writes about a similar confusion in his diary: '[t]he literary productions of men of rigidly good family and rigidly correct education mostly treat social conventions and contrivances—the artificial forms of living—as if they were cardinal facts of life.'²⁸ The focus on the manners of urban and cultivated life confuses Shen and Hardy, which generates a melancholia about the incompatibility of modern culture and rural identity. This melancholia is echoed in Hardy's 'native', Clym Yeobright. Both Hardy's *The Return* and Shen's *Long River* are stories about 'the return of the native', and both texts also demand an engagement with the same question: how possible is a spiritual return in the face of modernity? Although, for Clym, the answer is a grim one, as authors, Hardy and Shen achieve a kind of return by reimagining their homelands. A comparison between these two novels can locate a productive tension between the naive and the poetic languages as crucial

²⁴ Michael Millgate (ed.), *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 107.

²⁵ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 158.

²⁶ Shen had lived and taught in Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Qingdao, and Kunming when he published *Candle Flickering* (Shanghai: Cultural Life Press, 1941) from which this note is taken.

²⁷ Zhang, XII, p. 23.

²⁸ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 222.

to Shen and Hardy's idea of what the novel can achieve; and a close reading of characterisations and rituals in these two novels can reveal their searching for connections with a re-enchanted Nature.

Long River begins with a description of local tangerine orchards as they appear through the seasons, sometimes from a local perspective, sometimes from a traveller's:

The trees are not high and are a colour of thick greenness all year round. In summer, the blossoms are white and small, and are so fragrant that they can make you 'drunk.' After the frost's Descent in September, the fruits amongst the branches are contrasted by the heavy frost so that they appear even more yellow and bright, like beams of sunlight if looking from afar. When the picking season comes, piles and piles of them can be seen everywhere along the little wharfs, like heaps of fire.²⁹

Here, Shen executes shifts between an observation of the local agricultural circle, from the vantage point of local knowledge, and a poetic description that associates tangerines with sunshine and fire, arguably issuing from a traveller's perspective. The poetic language, however, does not seem to interfere with a local temperament nor alienate a stranger from local Nature. The narrator continues after several scenes about the exchanges between the local orchard owner and a traveller:

Two thousand years ago, Qu Yuan, the outcast from the state of Chu, rode in a little white boat and sailed upstream along the River Yuan, and he must have seen such tangerine trees and so wrote 'Ju Song' ('Ode to the Tangerine'). Although the local living conditions changed more or less over the course of two thousand years, people and trees still lived by the earth, attached to the soil on both sides of the river; throughout the changes of seasons and weathers, the old died and went back to earth, and the new was born and grew as if all out of the soil.³⁰

During the Warring States Periods (1042BC-223BC), the Hunan Province was part of the state of Chu which nurtured the well-known ancient Chinese poet Qu Yuan (about 340BC-278BC). 'Ju Song' is from his poem collection *Jiu Zhang (Nine Chapters)* and is a typical example of a classical Chinese lyrical poem that sings the praises of things. The use of this nostalgic reference to an earlier moment in literary history triggers a poetic imagining of Xiangxi and connects the past with the present. The transition from the previous scene with its dialogues between the native and the traveler to this poetic

²⁹ Zhang, X, p. 10.

³⁰ Zhang, X, p. 12.

depiction of those living on this piece of land achieves a connection between the naïve and the poetic.

In *The Return*, such shifts between the naïve and the poetic languages are also salient. In a passage depicting the calm winter on Egdon Heath, human loneliness and human connections with non-human beings are captured in a comic tone: 'any man could imagine himself to be Adam without the least difficulty, they attracted the attention of every bird within eyeshot, every reptile not yet asleep, and set the surrounding rabbits curiously watching from hillocks at a safe distance.'³¹ Here, Hardy illustrates a reversed relationship between the traditional human observer and the non-human participant, and the narrator describes how characters are observed by bird, reptile, and rabbits—naïve sensibilities that are attached to the locale, in a poetic language that is only discernible to the narrator. Instead of alienation, the rich reciprocity between the human and non-human world highlights connections between humanity and Nature. Similarly, when Mrs. Yeobright returns from her rejected visit to Clym and Eustacia, in contrast to her physical and emotional exhaustion, 'the intermittent husky notes of the male grasshoppers from every tuft of furze were enough to show that amid the prostration of the larger animal species an unseen insect world was busy in all the fullness of life.'³² This animated microcosm of insects contrasts with the emotional turmoil caused by the rejection and the dying physical life of Mrs. Yeobright, yet what is shown is an order of Nature that renders all organisms equal rather than alienating human life from Nature. In both occasions, a poetic language that distances the observer is at work, and a reconciliation is achieved by this shift between sensory experiences and a poetic view.

In the opening scene of the novel when Thomasin is carried back in Venn's van to her aunt's home from her failed wedding, Venn takes a rest during the trip and surveys the scene. Given the later development of the plot, it may be deduced that Venn is concerned with the destiny of Thomasin's marriage to Wildeve; what comes next, however, is not Venn's further plan but the narrator's observation of Nature:

To do things musingly, and by small degrees, seemed, indeed, to be a duty in the Egdon valleys at this transitional hour, for there was that in the condition of the heath itself which resembled protracted and halting dubiousness. It was the quality of the repose

³¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878; Macmillan, 1985), p. 115.

³² Hardy, *The Return*, p. 267.

appertaining to the scene. This was not the repose of actual stagnation, but the apparent repose of incredible slowness. A condition of healthy life so nearly resembling the torpor of death is a noticeable thing of its sort; to exhibit the inertness of the desert, and at the same time to be exercising powers akin to those of the meadow, and even of the forest, awakened in those who thought of it the attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve.³³

This passage is set on an evening in November near Rainbarrow, where Eustacia lives, and, in this respect, what Hardy is depicting here resembles the hibernation of animals: the repose, the slowness, the torpor of death, and the inertness. Although human activities, particularly in such a rural area, are slowed by the season, it seems here that human thinking is also slowed down as in a reciprocity with Nature. The narrator uses a poetic language to describe a holistic world where everything is under the same force of the winter torpor, including human feelings. Following this paragraph is a description of Egdon in Venn's naïve language – an impressionistic view that illustrates distinct temporality: '[t]he scene before the reddleman's eyes was a gradual series of ascents from the level of the road backward into the heart of the heath. It embraced hillocks, pits, ridges, acclivities, one behind the other, till all was finished by a high hill cutting against the still light sky.'³⁴ In these transitions of perspectives and languages, Hardy shifts from the burden of human thoughts to Nature's rhythm, and thus establishes connections between humanity and Nature.

The first notable shared feature of both Hardy and Shen's regional novels, then, is that Nature, instead of being a backdrop, seems to have an agency of its own and can also form part of a reciprocal relationship with the characters. Both authors write long passages about Nature even before the characters are introduced. Hardy once sent the manuscript of *The Return of the Native* (1878) to John Blackwood, publisher of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Blackwood politely declared himself unable to place it in the near future and complained that Hardy had spent too long on the opening scenes 'without a thread of light to throw an interest round the rugged figures' and that 'there is hardly anything like what is called Novel interest.'³⁵ The publisher's complaint implies that 'nature' is not a legitimate subject for what is called 'Novel interest'.

³³ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 37.

³⁴ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 37.

³⁵ Frank B Pinion, *Thomas Hardy: art and thought* (London: Springer, 1977), p. 178

One distinct feature of both *The Return* and *Long River* is the seasonal structure of the plot which in turn introduces agricultural communities' association with rituals. Chapter One of *Long River*, 'Human Beings and the Land', echoes *The Return's* Chapter One 'A Face on which Time makes but Little Impression', as both are dedicated to elaborating the local environment and customs. By placing both in a central position from the beginning of the novel, Hardy and Shen declare them to be their 'Novel interest'—a re-enchantment of the relationship between humanity and Nature. John Paterson suggests that '[t]o Hardy, Nature was its own excuse for being. It was what his Angel Clare would call "actualised poetry," a poetry whose beauty and splendour were expressions not of an eccentric art or a socialised imagination but of natural objects in themselves.'³⁶ A representation of Nature that refuses to alienate it is shared by both Hardy and Shen and is rooted in their rustic sensibilities.

In 1878, the year that *The Return* was published, Hardy notes his understanding of the new aesthetics of his times with examples from art: 'as I wrote at the beginning of *The Return of the Native*—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. Paradoxically put, it is to see the beauty in ugliness.'³⁷ Another note by Hardy in January 1887 elaborates on this new aesthetics:

The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art--it is a student's style—the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there—half hidden, it may be—and the two united are depicted as the All.³⁸

And on 5th August 1888 he notes again: '[t]o find beauty in ugliness is the province of the poet.'³⁹ For Hardy, this aesthetics is 'new' because it departs from the Victorian tradition of realism in imaginative literature and rejects an objectification of Nature—the new aesthetics is about a dissolution of the dichotomy between Nature and culture. Xiao Jiwei argues for a similar aesthetics in Shen's works suggesting that whilst he was

³⁶ John Paterson, 'Lawrence's Vital Source: Nature and Character in Thomas Hardy', *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 456.

³⁷ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 124. *The Return* was serialised on *Belgravia* from January to December in 1878, and this note was recorded on April 22nd, 1878.

³⁸ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 192.

³⁹ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 222.

'[a]ttuned to the traditional aesthetic sentiment that emphasizes the cosmic-universal meaning of nature, his writing is however too unruly to be labelled classicist; its spirit unmistakably modern, it nonetheless deviates from social realist aesthetics that became the hallmark of Chinese literary modernity'.⁴⁰

As a novelist, Hardy deploys this new aesthetics through an atavistic representation of Egdon Heath: 'Civilisation was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation. [...] We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.'⁴¹ The personification of Egdon in *The Return* demonstrates a synchronisation between the heath and the age—'[i]t was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.'⁴² The development of anthropology in the late-Victorian age cast a spotlight on ancient cultures. Hardy quotes from Schlegel in his notebook: '[t]he deepest want & deficiency of all modern Art lies in the fact that the Artists have no mythology,'⁴³ which expresses a yearning for a mythological past before the dualism of nature and culture had been established. Michael Zeitler traces Hardy's readings of Edward Burnett Tylor, Andrew Lang, and Walter Pater while he was writing *The Return* and affirms an 'anthropologically informed representation of Wessex' in the novel.⁴⁴ Hardy writes on December 18th, 1890:

Mr E. Clodd this morning gives an excellently neat answer to my question why the superstitions of a remote Asiatic and a Dorset labourer are the same; 'The attitude of man', he says, 'at corresponding levels of culture, before like phenomena, is pretty much the same, your Dorset peasants representing the persistence of the barbaric idea which confuses persons and things, and founds wide generalisations on the slenderest

⁴⁰ Jiwei Xiao, 'Nature, Woman and Lyrical Ambiguity in Shen Congwen's Writing,' *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 67, 1 (2013), p. 47.

⁴¹ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 33.

⁴² Hardy, *The Return*, p. 33.

⁴³ Lennart A. Björk ed., *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, Volume One (London: Springer, 1985), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Michael A. Zeitler, *Representations of Culture: Thomas Hardy's Wessex & Victorian Anthropology* (Peter Lang, 2007), p. 72.

analogies.' (This 'barbaric idea which confuses persons and things' is, by the way, also common to the highest imaginative genius--that of the poet.)⁴⁵

For Hardy, there are obvious synergies between Wessex and Eastern cultures, and through his propensity to personify Nature in *The Return*, as seen in the personification of Egdon Heath, Hardy does confuse 'persons and things', which he suggests is the highest imaginative tool of the poet. Hardy adds the observation to his note that the 'barbaric idea which confuses persons and things' connects atavistic beliefs with poetic imaginations. Therefore, by illustrating Egdon Heath and its links with an undeveloped state of civilisation, Hardy demonstrates not how outdated but how vital it is: '[t]he instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon,'⁴⁶ and this reading is amplified by Zeitler's suggestion that Hardy reimagines Wessex as a living connection to the roots of a mythopoeic culture.⁴⁷ Deriving from Zeitler's study of Hardy's relationship with Victorian anthropology, I argue that Hardy as a novelist makes the readers 're-feel' myth rather than the scientific discourse of anthropology, re-enchanting readers with connections to a primitive past through his characterisation of Eustacia Vye and Diggory Venn and his representation of the seasonal rituals of bonfires.

Eustacia's energy, paralleled with that of Egdon Heath, challenges it; however, sometimes Eustacia seems to be reconciled to Egdon's power and becomes integrated with its inner passion. For example, in the scene where Eustacia dances with Damon Wildeve at a village festival, fantastical senses override their sense of social norms:

There is a certain degree and tone of light which tends to disturb the equilibrium of the senses, and to promote dangerously the tenderer moods; added to movement, it drives the emotions to rankness, the reason becoming sleepy and unperceiving in inverse proportion; and this light fell now upon these two from the disc of the moon. All the dancing girls felt the symptoms, but Eustacia most of all.⁴⁸

This scene can be interpreted as an illustration of Eustacia's unconscious compatibility with Egdon – both of them contain a sensual vitality that can liberate spirits from social order and the regained passion between Eustacia and Wildeve during the dance

⁴⁵ Millgate, *The Life*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 347.

⁴⁷ Zeitler, p. 70.

⁴⁸ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 245.

facilitates their elopement. Unlike others, Eustacia's dancing is viewed by the narrator as rebellious— 'back into old paths which now doubly irregular,' as the personified rebellious Egdon Heath challenges the aesthetics of the age: to see beauty in ugliness is to see through the alienation of modern society and restore a connection with the mythological past.⁴⁹

Diggory Venn is another mythological character: his redness serves as a vivid mark. Expressions relating to his redness are associated with sin and crime--the 'bloodcoloured figure', 'the mark of Cain', but clearly Hardy has another idea: he finds a beauty and nostalgia in this redness.⁵⁰ Hardy allies the reddleman's way of living with aesthetics—'the poetry of existence', 'a sublimation of all the horrid dreams', and 'imagination'—although it might be about the ugly and dark, as suggested by the words 'horrid' and 'bogeys.'⁵¹ In contrast, the new era of Egdon - where modern culture and mythology are at odds with one another - is filled with modern inventions, and can be much less imaginative and distinct. Its idiosyncrasy is lost and the new epoch is faceless in its uniformity and a threat to regional identity. Venn is the most mobile character in the novel. It is through Venn's view and movement that the narrator and the reader explore Egdon. In the following episode, sensibilities that arise from local knowledge are revealed through Venn's point of view: '[t]hough these shaggy hills were apparently so solitary, several keen round eyes were always ready on such a wintry morning as this to converge upon a passer-by. Feathered species sojourned here in hiding which would have created wonder if found elsewhere'; then a traveller's point of view is added by the narrator:

A traveller who should walk and observe any of these visitants as Venn observed them now could feel himself to be in direct communication with regions unknown to man. Here in front of him was a wild mallard—just arrived from the home of the north wind. The creature brought within him an amplitude of Northern knowledge. Glacial catastrophes, snowstorm episodes, glittering auroral effects, Polaris in the zenith, Franklin underfoot—the category of his commonplaces was wonderful. But the bird, like many other philosophers, seemed as he looked at the reddleman to think that a present moment of comfortable reality was worth a decade of memories.⁵²

⁴⁹ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 245.

⁵⁰ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 91.

⁵¹ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 91.

⁵² Hardy, *The Return*, pp. 98-9.

Here, the narrator is less of an observer as he is the object of observation. As the first sentence suggests, the birds are observing the passers-by. This demonstrates that there is another layer of observation or witness between characters, the narrator, and the non-human world; a world in which the narrator tries many times to mingle his view. In this passage, then, two threads emerge: Venn is a traveller being observed by the non-human world as well as the narrator, however, a communication is also described between Venn and his native environment, which renders the narrator and readers as alienated strangers. The return of the mallard, from Venn's perspective, is a sensory and seasonal experience; from the narrator's perspective, however, it carries more meanings and universal connections. In this way, the seeming alienation is reconciled by uncovering these connections, and the narrative structure, with its complex points of view, yields more than a novelised anthropology. Thus, the myth of a reciprocity between humans and Nature is revealed.

Long River also shows the vitality and connections within Nature that can be found in traditional Xiangxi culture. Shen writes in the preface to *Long River* that:

Having been away from my hometown for eighteen years, everything seems different when my boat enters Chen River basin. Superficially, everything has made a progress; deeply, if observed carefully, a tendency towards decay is contained within the change. Most obviously, the traditionally preserved rural virtue of integrity and simplicity is nearly extinct. What replaces it is a vulgar view of life that flaunts venality and has been cultivated successfully by practical society in the last two decades. Though superstitions have been knocked down, morality and the sense of right and wrong are lost as well.⁵³

Compared with modern degradation, the seasonal rituals of the old way of life hold more beauty for Shen. In *Long River*, local religion is shown as a fetishistic belief in Nature facilitated through seasonal rituals and a pervasive supernatural belief: '[n]o matter how plain and innocent their life is, they still manage to keep an exotic emotion: either the local legends and tales lead them to a beautiful and gentle wonderland, or, by believing in gods, they find a way to deal with all kinds of misfortunes.'⁵⁴ Shen notes the emotional release and a kind of imaginative enablement through performing local rituals: 'Although non-religious', Yaoyao's family follow local festivals and taboos, and 'from these circumstances they obtain a merry and solemn emotion of liberation.'⁵⁵

⁵³ Zhang, X, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Zhang, X, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Zhang, X, pp. 44-5.

This valuing of rituals as constitutive of landscape and place is conveyed as rooted in the native sensibilities of Wessex and Xiangxi, confronting a loss of the sense of belonging in modern society that both Hardy and Shen personally expressed. The image of fire is used as a specific illustration of this valuing of rituals in both novels—in *Long River*, it is the burning of straw; in *The Return*, it is the bonfires. In both novels, fire is linked with mythological or religious rituals. For *The Return*, bonfires are more than dramatic settings or signal lights between Eustacia and Damon—they are marks of Egdon's old mythological past which foreground seasonal rituals. For *Long River*, the ethnic minority Miao culture in Xiangxi is reputed to embrace a worship of the god of fire, Zhu Rong, whom they believe to be an ancestor of their tribe.⁵⁶ Therefore, the repetitive images of burning fires can be viewed as reminders of an ancient belief in Xiangxi. On seeing the fire, Manman, the old sailor and now gatekeeper of the local ancestral temple, perceives something but fails to articulate it:

He seems to have perceived something that belongs to the destiny of the local future, but he could not tell what exactly it is, nor does he really understand. When he arrives at the Maple Col and looks at the Turnip Brook, which is veiled by the night mist, as if asleep, there are only several dots of flickering lights amongst the thin wood. Downstream there are also few lights. The brook sounds aloud in the silence of the night. Over the distant mountain is a patch of wild burning, extending and dancing, on and off. The old sailor stands on the steps of the temple and says to himself: 'The good fortune is leaving! What is coming comes, I fear nothing!'⁵⁷

At the end of the last chapter when the village opera is finished, the narrator follows Yaoyao's perspective and describes the lively scene of people's departure at the harbour. Then the narrator turns to a fire over the mountain, where '[t]he reddish violet wild burning over a distant mountain is blown by the wind and glowing more and more fervently,' and Manman, watching the same direction, comments that 'the burning has been there for over ten days—it seems to be endless.'⁵⁸ This view initiates a debate between Yaoyao and Manman about the endurance of beauty. Yaoyao compares the burning of the fire to the sun and argues that 'beautiful things should be there forever'; Manman, seeing through Yaoyao's innocence and idealism, says: 'Beautiful things will

⁵⁶ Chen Zhaozhao, 'Research on Zhu-Rong: The Mythical Legend and the Connection with the Worship in Fire', *Chia Nan Annual Bulletin*, No. 30 (2004), p. 438.

⁵⁷ Zhang, X, pp. 106-7.

⁵⁸ Zhang, X, p. 168.

never last long.⁵⁹ This melancholic aesthetics can also be found in Shen's other fiction, as well as in his personal writings, where he states repeatedly that '[b]eauty always makes people melancholic, yet still it is appreciated.'⁶⁰ Xiangxi's past and an encroaching modernity converge on these descriptions and imaginations of fire: the flickering flame can be either the passion of a remnant culture or a prophecy for the weakening of the vitality of such culture under the threat of modernisation.

In *The Return*, the recurring bonfire represents Wessex's pagan past: 'it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.'⁶¹ The bonfire can also be viewed as a ritual that reveals a permanent ethos of rebelliousness against the seasonal frame of the novel, connecting the past with the present:

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light.⁶²

The bonfire portrays Egdon Heath as poised between both the atavistic and the civilised. The eye contact with birds, fires and bonfires in these novels capture fluid moments of vision that associate the present with a mythological past. In revealing the connections between them, Hardy and Shen call for a new aesthetics of re-enchantment and imagination. The beauty of Hardy's and Shen's regional novels lies in an obliteration of the modern tendency to objectify 'landscapes' (the word indicates an anthropocentric view) and to alienate Nature; instead, their narrative demonstrates the interdependence between human culture and Nature.

The tension between the native and the cultivated identities that is core to the representation of Clym can also be noticed in *Long River*. This tension allows Hardy and Shen to be positioned in an interesting dialogue with one another about the alienated native self in the face of modernity. *Long River* is an unfinished novel written between

⁵⁹ Zhang, X, p. 169.

⁶⁰ Zhang, XII, p. 107.

⁶¹ Hardy, *The Return*, pp. 40-41.

⁶² Hardy, *The Return*, p. 41.

1938 and 1942.⁶³ When he began it, Shen had just returned from his second trip to his hometown Fenghuang after he first left Xiangxi in 1921. He wrote a number of short stories and essays about the changes that happened to Xiangxi after his long leave; and he already had an idea of writing another novel about these changes when he wrote *The Border Town* (1934), a major literary success. Sheng writes:

I plan to provide the readers with a comparison', he stated, 'I will write another work about the civil war in the last two decades and its impact on farmers [...] I will write about the worries and fears of common people during the changes through which this nation has been brought to an unknown destiny by history.⁶⁴

Shen repeats his blueprint in the preface to *Long River*. 'I will continue *The Border Town* in another work to write about the distortion of the characteristics and soul of local farmers and their loss of simplicity in the last two decades.'⁶⁵ Changes to traditional agricultural life and the impact of modernisation on local communities, material as well as mental, are themes for *The Return* and *Long River*. In *The Return*, sympathy is shown towards Clym's dilemma in the narrative: '[i]n consequence of this relatively advanced position, Yeobright might have been called unfortunate. The rural world was not ripe for him.'⁶⁶ In her article on Victorian anthropology and *The Return*, Patricia O'Hara comments:

Like Victorian anthropology, *The Return of the Native* contemplates the cultural journey from primitive infancy to civilised maturity. But where anthropology plotted an upward, progressive 'nobler tendency of advancing culture', which made the past legible and the future possible, *The Return of the Native* offers no such sureties. Its meditations on the cultural past and present lead only to dislocations—to a condition analogous to that of the returned native, Clym Yeobright, last seen as a man of 'less than thirty-three', suffering from a 'wrinkled mind'.⁶⁷

⁶³ This is according to the editorial note in *Complete Works* (Volume Ten, p.2). American Chinese scholar David Der-wei Wang claimed that it was in fact written at the end of 1939 or beginning of 1940 and first serialised in 1943. The first separate edition was published in 1945 by the Wenju Press in Kunming, and another edition in 1948 by Kaiming Bookstore Press in Shanghai. In Shen's own autobiographical notes (Jishou University Journal, 1988, Volume Two) he only recorded the 1948 edition.

⁶⁴ Zhang, VIII, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Zhang, X, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Hardy, *The Return*, p. 171.

⁶⁷ Patricia O'hara, 'Narrating the native: Victorian anthropology and Hardy's the return of the native', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 20, 2 (1997), p. 158.

This contradiction between a physical return of the 'native' and the impossibility of a spiritual return is elaborated by the two writers' mediations between the two kinds of languages. For Hardy and Shen, the difficulty of writing about the 'native' not only lies in the reluctant adaptation to an increasingly cosmopolitan modern culture but also in the tense but productive movement between abstract language and their intense sensibilities towards Nature. Nature in their works is autonomous, and language is simultaneously too concrete (naïve) and too abstract (poetic), thus a combination of the naïve and the poetic languages reflects both language's assertion of its own distinct mode of representing Nature and a simultaneous recognition that Nature's autonomy is too irreducible to be accurately articulated by either language. Xiao Jiwei comments about Shen: 'At the core of [...]his regionalist universalism is a lyrical ambiguity derived from his distinctive approach to nature.'⁶⁸ Xiao defines this 'lyrical ambiguity' as 'a certain loss of self in the other as well as an effort to sustain an aesthetic distance between the two.'⁶⁹ This comment echoes that of Williams's criticism about the narrator in Hardy's novels being participant and observer at the same time: the immersion and distance offered by these two positions create a unique mediation where Hardy and Shen combine a naïve and a poetic language to link the 'native' with the poetic and to deal with the alienation posed by modernity on Nature.

Qi concludes his article that the search for dialogic reverberations or intertextual confluences between Hardy and Chinese authors 'can be seen as emblematic of the anxiety or angst on the part of many Chinese as their country, in its uneasy march towards modernity, continues to seek and redefine its place among the world's civilisations.'⁷⁰ In this way, Hardy and Shen's regional novels can both be regarded as what Qi called 'emblematic of [...] anxiety or angst'. This is due to their dealings with the traditional and at times ancient roots of regional cultures and an encroaching modern society. A dialogue is generated between the two authors through their shared deployment of a dialectic between Nature and culture, which continually surfaces in both novels and which both authors utilise in order to search for connections rather than alienations.

⁶⁸ Xiao, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Xiao, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Qi, 'Anxiety, Angst, and the Search for Hardy's Chinese Tw[a]in', p. 158.



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