Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

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Carnival Reversals

Thomas Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge

[H]e could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle, of the blood and bones and flesh too strong, invincible for life, having learned at least once with his own eyes how tough . . . not a young man’s bones and flesh perhaps but the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive, actually was.

—Faulkner, “Pantaloon in Black” (1960 [1940]): 111

WHEREAS GEORGE ELIOT’ S DANIEL DERONDA can be regarded as intermediate between the carnivalesque and the non-carnivalesque modes because it is dominated by only one of the two main carnivalesque topoi—that of permeable boundaries between the self and the other, Thomas Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge displays both the morphology of horizontal osmosis, with its attendant hesitations, and that of the radical reversals of vertical hierarchies. The latter topos is, however, preponderant in the plot of Hardy’s novel.

The carnival intensities of The Mayor of Casterbridge are rooted in the portrayal of the protagonist, Michael Henchard; in less energetic forms they also unfold in the world around him. Unlike Daniel Deronda, this novel prominently includes carnivalesque occasions in the substance of its content. Yet the versions of the carnival that figure in its social setting are presented
as worn-out, diminished, bitter, or corrupt: the substance and the form of the content intersect in the recurrence of this feature. The first episode, for instance, takes place at a country fair that has reached a sad stage of deterioration (5, 15)—not only because it is drawing to an end and is first seen in the evening but also because fairs such as this, cyclic business-and-festive carnivalesque occasions, are losing in the competition with the weekly market in towns like Casterbridge. The novel depicts the period when the process of domesticating, taming, and officially endorsing potentially disruptive Dionysian remissions reached an advanced state owing to the spread of new business procedures, especially in agriculture. At the time represented in the novel, the carnival has become an intrinsic part of a market town’s regular life: its *agon* and cross-class shoulder-rubbing have been transferred to the *carrefour* of the market, its *ilinx* and choric intoxication confined to the weekly Sunday-afternoon half-pint in The Three Mariners, and its transgressiveness taken over, on a perpetual basis, by the appropriately named Mixen Lane (194–96).

The Mayor of Casterbridge starts with a carnivalesque version of *in medias res*: the first major drama of Henchard’s life, his falling in love with Susan, is in the past (J. Hillis Miller 1970: 102), and there is already a sense of “stale familiarity” (4) in his attitude to her, enhanced by the family’s weariness as they are walking into the fairgrounds. It is not the first time that Henchard indulges in loud drunken fantasies about the sale of his wife: the tendency has been swelling and has reached the point of crisis. This crisis is, indeed, played out in the furmity tent, conflating a pagan refutation of Christian marriage with a mercantile replacement of personal relationships by a business deal (cf. Bruce Johnson 1983: 76–83). The tenuousness of threadbare man-made structures—whether a marriage or a tent—is placed in contrast with the endurance of basic natural patterns, such as the loving intimacy of horses huddling together at the fair (11).

As has been noted (see J. Hillis Miller 1970: 96–102; Tandon 2003), The Mayor of Casterbridge is pointedly concerned with the submerged continuity of the past in the present. Traces of the carnival survive in the world of the novel—in its hierarchy reversals, unsolicited confessions, the residue of the local *corrida* that nearly maims Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane, and the skim-mington ride (213–14) that leads to Lucetta’s death. These corrupt excesses are followed by Lent (Henchard’s self-starvation in exile), likewise corrupt because not limited in time.

1. Cf. Stallybrass and White’s 1986 discussion of carnivalesque transgression as a constant endemic part of culture rather than cyclically recurring license.
Against such relics of the carnival in the general sociocultural setting, the novel stages a number of striking cases of peripeteia. Its misrule is of the topsy-turvy kind; its crowning and uncrowning take the shape of the making and loss of fortunes and prestige characteristic of the early period of market economy. The characters’ rolling up and sliding down the wheel of fortune, typical of Hardy’s novels in general, is here thematicized most systematically: “‘Tis turn and turn about, isn’t it! . . . Up and down! I’m used to it,” says Henchard to Farfrae, for whom this is “the way o’ the warrld” (173). From the homeless hay-trusser Henchard has moved on to become a rich merchant and Mayor of the town, eventually to fall from grace, go bankrupt, turn into a buffoon (on the occasion of Prince Albert’s visit), lose every hope of family affection, and die in solitude and destitution. His wife Susan’s position moves from that of a desired woman in the remoter fictional past to a burdensome chattel in the novel’s first episode, from a beloved companion to a deserted single parent, and then up again from a poor relative to the Mayor’s wife. The fortunes of Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta, and Farfrae likewise fluctuate throughout the novel, almost like stock prices on the Exchange. Different rural professions lend their poetics to the Hardy novels set against them: in The Mayor of Casterbridge the corn and hay trade of the period prior to the 1848 repeal of the Corn Laws is largely responsible not only for the novel’s sociohistorical setting but also for the symbolism of its internal topography.

In keeping with the incidence of carnivalesque episodes in the plot, the topography of the novel is dominated by open spaces—the fairgrounds, the market square, the Heath, and the Ring in which transgressive privacy combines with agoraphobia—and liminal spaces, such as the bridge, the inn, the yard, the doorway, a door disguised by wallpaper. The shifts of perspective in these two kinds of mise-en-scène suggest a restrained interpenetration. It is on the virtual threshold of the transgressive furmity tent that we first see Newson; on his second appearance he crosses the town’s threshold river with the help of a removable plank; it is from the threshold of the King’s Arms that we first see Henchard when Susan comes to seek him in Casterbridge. A stone bridge is the setting for Henchard’s aborted suicide. Thin partitions allow for theatrical eavesdropping scenes that enhance the motif of communication gone awry. This motif also includes uncalled-for confessional outpourings (Henchard’s to Farfrae, Lucetta’s to Elizabeth-Jane), the recidivistic suppression of needful information (whether about the quality of merchandise or about people’s identity and fate), and the characters’ “selective deafness and blindness,” their denial of “headroom” to each other’s messages (Adamson 1991: 56).
The heart of the town of Casterbridge is its agora, the market square, in which people from various walks of life come into close contact, engage in exchanges, and provide entertainment for themselves and others. Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane watch this arena from a doubly liminal space, an upstairs window of a house facing this square. The participants and the spectators seldom merge but can sometimes exchange places: after watching a heartbreaking scene of the imminent parting of a laboring couple, Farfrae walks down into the market and, admiringly observed by Lucetta, hires the man who would otherwise have been separated from his sweetheart. Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane are themselves, metaphorically speaking, in the marriage market while they are watching the literal market from the window. During the “skimmity ride” Lucetta suddenly—and fatally—realizes that from her secure place in the audience she has been pushed into the center of the show.²

Carnival settings come in pairs and threesomes in the novel, with a licensed carnival usually shaded by a darker counterpart. The photonegative of the institutionalized market square of Casterbridge is the Roman amphitheatre, with its memories of bloody spectacles: surreptitious meetings for shady deals take place on these spacious yet detached and haunted grounds. However, a spectacle of cruelty makes inroads into the town square, which is complete with a bull stake—the place where bulls used to be baited with dogs in order to increase their blood circulation and thus soften their flesh before they are slaughtered—a fit allegory on the larger-than-life Henchard being “baited by little people” (Paul Turner 1998: 98; cf. Showalter 1979 on Henchard’s “unmanning”).³ As entertainment, the market square vies with the competing playgrounds set up by Henchard and Farfrae during a festival. At the Weydon-Prior’s fair a licensed vendor of alcoholic drinks has its rival in the smuggler’s furmity tent, the one that draws Henchard into its “maelstrom depths” (6). Finally, the stately procession down the main streets during the royal visit (temporarily disrupted by Henchard’s carnivalesque intrusion), is shadowed by the skimmity ride (an “inn-joke,” cf. Longstaffe 1998: 21) that exhibits the effigies of Henchard and Lucetta.

Whereas in Daniel Deronda the reversal of fortunes is an auxiliary motif, a catalyst rather than a consequence of psychological developments, in The Mayor of Casterbridge it is the motif of the horizontal transgression of boundaries that is relegated from the foreplane to the background. The topography

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². The carnivalesque elements, including the public or open-air setting of most of the pivotal scenes in the novel, are also discussed in Michael Valdez Moses 2000: 175ff.
of this background is a storehouse of carnival semiotics. Though Casterbridge has no suburbs (21, 70) and is separated from the countryside by the remains of an ancient moat and earthwork fortifications, it is invaded by field butterflies and dust, and, as a market town, hosts and traffics in stocks of agricultural implements and produce. Its boundaries are also crossed in the other direction—the citizens occasionally descend into the surrounding villages to help with the harvest. Inside, the carnivalesque tendency of “individual unrestraint as to boundaries” (46) is held, but only just, in check. Doors and windows are open (46), making the ground floor transparent from the street to the back gardens, but one usually enters Henchard’s house by a tunnel-like passage leading to the yard; the entrance to the hospitable Three Mariner’s Inn is through a narrow dark passage; the front door of Peter’s Finger Inn is usually bolted, and one enters through a slit in a side wall. In the daytime, shopkeepers’ wares encroach on the sidewalks outside the shops, to the unhappiness of constables. The motif of expansion also involves the dough that is made from Henchard’s grown wheat and that overflows the ovens and swells the consumers’ stomachs (cf. Garson 2000: 87). The dinner at the King’s Arms, where the hecklers from behind the thin partition reproach Henchard for his “unprincipled bread” (24), is presented as Henchard’s Austerlitz (103), a Pyrrhic victory of Napoleonic overreaching—and perhaps a Napoleonic disrespect for the lives, or in this case, the health, of the multitudes: instead of retracting the bad grain and absorbing the loss, as principle would require, Henchard brazens it out in public while desperately seeking help in private. In a dogged fight for his own dignity, Henchard tramples the dignity of others, “meddling with yer eternal soul and all that,” as Abel Whittle explains to Elizabeth-Jane (170). No wonder the laborers prefer the better informed and civilized Farfrae as an employer even if it means longer hours and smaller wages.

Images and motifs tend to acquire a life of their own in Hardy’s narratives. In The Mayor of Casterbridge the carnival morphology seems to have drawn out and domesticated a small repertoire of appropriate motifs, for example, public entertainment with or without a small fee (81), Elizabeth whirling vertiginously in a dance with Farfrae, a vicious mask on the back wall of High Place Hall (108–9). The topos of anthropophagy creeps in through Christopher Coney’s digging up of the pennies that had covered Susan Henchard’s eyes and spending them on drink—the townspeople regard this as “a cannibal deed” (92), and Solomon Longways, who defends

4. As Marjorie Garson notes, on the basis of such imagery as well as the catalogue of flowers next to Casterbridge houses, the town is “eroticized” (2000: 84).
Coney, is moved to collocate the reference to this act with the “resurrectionist” digging-up of corpses for sale to anatomists. The motif of dismemberment is likewise brought in by a member of the choric townspeople, who, confusing the ancient Romans with the Roman Catholic James II, tells Farfrae that “Casterbridge is a old, hoary place o’ wickedness. . . . [W]e rebelled against the King one or two hundred years ago, in the time of the Romans, and . . . lots of us was hanged on Gallows Hill, and quartered, and our different jints sent about the country like butcher’s meat” (40): the execution for high treason is turned into a spargamos.

The Euripedian motif of dismemberment, the destruction of the wholeness and discreteness of bodily identity suggested by the latter utterance, also characterizes the tension between the conscious motives and the subconscious drives of the protagonist, Michael Henchard. The motivation of this “Man of Character,” as he is called in the novel’s subtitle, is associated with his peripeteia; the unconscious drives with his uncanny attraction to the lodestone rock of identity-erasure. The former are a prominent feature of his life story, and the main core of the novel’s plot. The latter—the tense dialectics of self-fashioning and self-erasure, building up of a powerful self and the impulse to surrender its discreteness—are a hermeneutic challenge. The contradictions by which Henchard is riven have been interpreted in a variety of ways—for example, as a conflict between the desire to achieve eminence and the desire to love, seen as stronger than the need to be loved (Gatrell 2000; Rivinus 1992); as the syndrome of alcohol dependence (a “commonplace and tragic malady of the human spirit,” Rivinus 249) temporarily replaced by an addiction to work; or as a clash between career and ethical commitments (Moses 2000). But the contrasting phases of Henchard’s characters can also be read as oscillations between the life drive and the death drive—in keeping with the full title of the novel, *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge*. Within the conceptual structure of carnival topoi, the death drive signifies an individual’s unrestrained surrender of the *principium individuationis*, an unchecked release of one’s hold on one’s own separate self.

A larger-than-life personality impatient with middle-ground compromise, Henchard is presented as liable to extreme self-abnegation. Though strong, healthy, imposing, and well versed in country things, he harbors a version of the “universal wish not to live” (Hardy 1981: 411), which
he tends to misperceive as anger at himself or others. A less mysterious (because temporary) form of this death wish is displaced onto his estranged wife, Susan, whose response when on arriving to Casterbridge she sees him in his new splendor is “I want to go, pass away” (26). After Susan’s death, during the wake, even the young Elizabeth-Jane thinks of life as “terrestrial constraint” (91). Soon after that point, the motif of reaching out to one’s own death shifts back to Henchard and grows in intensity. In the tumult of misery on learning that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, Henchard wends his way, symbolically, to the former site of executions (97); after the skimington ride he goes to the river with a suicidal purpose and is stopped by the surprise of seeing his effigy in the water: in effigy, at least, he is already dead. On leaving Casterbridge at the end of the novel, Henchard compares himself to Cain, whom none can slay (“I—Cain—go alone as I deserve”; 239). He interprets the deferral of death as Cain’s punishment: “folk dying before their time like frosted leaves, though wanted by their families, the country, and the world; while I, an outcast, an encumberer of the ground, wanted by nobody, and despised by all, live on against my will!” (244). The burden of this simile is the wish to die; the author subverts the connotations of fratricide by sending Abel Whittle to be at Henchard’s side (cf. Raine 1994: 162). Abel, whom Henchard had brutally exposed for oversleeping, is then put in charge of the privacy of Henchard’s last sleep.

Henchard’s death of self-starvation (which Schopenhauer would call a saint’s death’), with his last will and testament calling for the obliteration of the communal memory of the self which, over the past twenty-two years, he has been struggling to impose on the social structure around him, is a confluence of penance and fulfillment. A fictional character’s mode of punishment

5. Henchard’s sense of life has been described as one of “perpetual soreness within” (Raine 1994: 168), a “constitutional” gloom (Moynahan 1956: 121), occasionally palliated by music and compensatory feelings.

6. J. B. Thompson’s 2001 analysis of Henchard’s forcing Whittle to appear at work without his breeches demonstrates that even in that episode, the balance of our sympathies is tipped in favor of Henchard rather than Farfrae even though the latter comes to Whittle’s rescue.

7. A Schopenhauerian saint starves himself to death in order to dissolve his identity as an objectification of the Will (Schopenhauer 1969, I: 352, 380). Though a number of articles and one book-length study (J. Hillis Miller 1970) have been devoted to Hardy’s relationship to Schopenhauer, it seems that the issue of the overlap between their systems of value is still not exhausted. The coda of The Mayor of Casterbridge, on Elizabeth-Jane’s learning “that happiness was but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain” (256; cf. also 43), has a clearly Schopenhauerian ring, whereas the Manichean coda of Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation would probably have resonated with Hardy’s own sense of existence on what his Tess Durbeyfield regards as a “blighted” star (Hardy 1991: 21).
may often be seen not as a weak deterrent but as a deep-seated motive for his transgressions: King Lear might have, secretly from himself, wished to be closed up from the world with Cordelia, and for a moment before the end he may have found “a way to have what he has wanted from the beginning” (Cavell 1987: 69); Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner might have sought the radical solitude that becomes his Nemesis (cf. Cavell 1988: 56–65).

Even Henchard’s loves may be seen not as expressions of the life drive but as forms of a partial self-surrender alternative to death. His affair with Lucetta in Jersey began during “one of those gloomy fits” when, he says to Farfrae, “the world seems to have the blackness of hell, and, like Job, I could curse the day that gave me birth” (60). His need for love is diagnosed in an ambiguous vocabulary: “He was the kind of man for whom some human object for pouring out his heat upon—were it emotive or were it choleric—was almost a necessity” (95): “human object” here connotes his tendency to treat a human being as property, the pronoun “some” suggesting that such “objects” are interchangeable; the phrase “pouring out” (like Keats’s nightingale “pouring out its soul abroad”) trails in the topos of surrendering the discreteness of the self. Since absence of familial bonds—the bonds that he himself periodically shakes off—gives him a sense of “an emotional void” within (113; cf. Daleski 1997: 116), beloved “human objects” may seem to be instrumental in filling that void. But that would mean a consolidation of the self rather than its surrender. Henchard’s loves are not of this constructive companionate kind.

Rather, they may be described as relics of the Manicheanism that in older times had gained expression in courtly love. Henchard’s is a gnostical temperament unaided by Manichean beliefs. His inner void lurks where the gnostic’s sense of an inner spark, a fragment of a transcendent spiritual realm, could have been—but he tends to displace this spark onto others and then jealously seek it again—in brother or wife or daughter: at the end of his life it is Elizabeth-Jane, who “in the midst of his gloom” seems to him “as a pin-point of light” (220). His passion needs distance and denial in order to last because it replaces, and replicates, a reaching-out to a realm beyond the self.\(^8\) He displaces his own inner beacon onto other human beings and loses interest in them as soon as they prove unable to sustain it. The blow that Elizabeth-Jane deals him by venting her resentment of him at her wedding

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\(^8\) This is not to deny other interpretations of Henchard’s self-defeat: he may, indeed, be seen also as a misogynist, a latent homosexual, an after-ripple of the “Wild Man” incapable of humble adulation (cf. Bernheimer 1952: 121), or a single-minded capitalist climber. By itself, however, none of these readings suffices for the sense of the tragic grandeur that is accorded to this character in the novel.
is not analyzed in the narrative; one may read it as caused by, among other things, the transformation of another icon into a small-souled accuser who scapegoats him for all the deceits among which she has lived her life. Thus Henchard’s last idol may be shattered. At this point, however, the narrative focus shifts to Elizabeth-Jane, and her belated remorse prevents us from reenacting this revulsion.

Whereas for Henchard close personal relationships link up with the death drive, his rags-to-riches power drive emerges as a version of the life drive—in twentieth-century novels of career this distribution of significance will be reversed. Henchard’s stint of prideful vitality demands practical self-realization in socioeconomic activity; his commercial success crowns his attempts to be “separate, unbeholden, emotionally and economically autonomous” (Adamson 1991: 53), socially and sexually independent. This agenda is eventually deenergized by the opposite pull, the lodestone rock of resentful and jealous emotional dependence. His worldly success begins soon after he takes an oath to abstain from alcohol for twenty-one years after he sells his wife. The success is thus an epiphenomenon of this self-imposed sobriety, that is, of his suppression of his own self-destroying Dionysian flow; yet he seems to perceive this self-refashioning as penance for which his rise in the world is a bonus palliative. His triumphs cease, not when he starts drinking again, but earlier—when he recoils from his love for Farfrae. His passions subvert the constructive channeling of his energy. His economic downfall begins with his starting to make business decisions not for reasonable profit but in order to underbid Farfrae, who has become his competitor.

9. Jane Adamson notes that the indefinite articles in the novel’s subtitle, “A Story of a Man of Character,” suggest the “unfinality of the narrative itself, its status as a story about a man of character about whom different stories might be told” (1991: 57). This effect is also achieved by the absence of inside views that would specify the composition of Henchard’s attitudes at various points in the novel, especially when he leaves Casterbridge at the end. Adamson analyzes the vast variety of metaphors through which Henchard is represented as one of the measures against “mind-shutting” on the reader’s part—that is, against a flaw in the cultural attitudes similar to a flaw that endangers interpersonal communication in the world of the novel.

10. H. M. Daleski sees in Henchard a masculine version of “the Diana complex” (1997: 111) that keeps some of Hardy’s heroines, such as Bathsheva Everdene of Far from the Madding Crowd or Sue Bridehead of Jude the Obscure, struggling against the threat of losing autonomy and self-enclosure, a threat, implicit in sexual union, of the permeability of the boundaries of the self.

11. Hardy’s copy for this oath as well as for the sale of the wife came from news items in the Dorset County Chronicle (see Paul Turner 1998: 92); attributing both these acts to the same agent may have been a challenge for the construction of overdetermined psychological causality.

The reading of Henchard’s passions in terms reminiscent of Sidney Carton’s Manichean self-immolation (see chapter 5) can gain support from his name, which is strikingly different from the plain-folk names in the novel, such as Grower or Newson. He seems to be one of the characters who exemplify Hardy’s belief that submerged among the English rural lower classes are descendants of old upper-class families, such as the aristocratic D’Urbervilles, whose name, a combination of the Latin and French roots meaning “town,” is symbolically countrified in Durbeyfield, the name assumed by Tess’s great-grandfather. The very sound of the name “Henchard” suggests that the origins of the protagonist of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* go back to the Norman side of the Battle of Hastings; an ancestor of his would have been rewarded with a landholding that could have slipped out of the hands of ensuing generations, leaving young Michael Henchard in the predicament of a parish-supported apprentice (64). The combination of Henchard’s name and distinguished Roman profile with his position as a job-seeking hay-trusser at the beginning of the novel hints at a reversal of hierarchies before the main action of the novel has even started. The contrasting connotations of a drop of poison (antiar) in his last name and of the angelic valor in his first name (Michael) suggest a tragic conflict of values and drives. Even his heathen divorce is not merely an echo of old rural ways; it is a reductive replica of annulments of dynastic/mercantile marriages that would have been widely practiced by his upper-class ancestors, usually under the pretext of incestuous bonds. Susan, indeed, is more of a sister than a wife to Henchard. She is presented as an uneducated countrywoman, yet one of “true cultivation” (8) that seems to be somehow mysteriously innate and that prepares the reader for her daughter Elizabeth’s conscious agenda of self-perfection. If Susan appealed to the humanely peaceable part of Henchard’s self, also represented by his brother who died at an early age and who at one point seems to be reincarnated in Farfrae, then her and Farfrae’s simultaneous arrival in Casterbridge effects a double return of the repressed.

A further paradox lies in the feudal coloring of Henchard’s capitalist business dealings, his forceful, outwardly ruthless, rule-of-thumb procedures with employer-employee relationships based, as it were, on expectations of loyal vassalage. Farfrae, on the other hand, represents the rise of the peace-

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13. Joe Fisher’s (2000: 135ff.) associating Henchard’s image with motifs that would make up the medieval “Wild Man” may get further support from this reading in view of the belief that the status of that grotesque figure used to be imagined not in terms of “a gradual ascent from the brute, but by a descent” (Bernheimer 1952: 8).

14. At the top of his power Henchard, indeed, exhibits most forms of behavior characteristic of what Veblen sees as the predatory upper class, claiming not only the labor but also the leisure of his dependents.
able lower-middle-class forces in the civilizing process that seeks to create new meritocratic hierarchies.\textsuperscript{15} Farfrae is quintessentially a middle-way moral agent, satisfied with building his fortune—and his happiness—on “small profits frequently repeated” (122). Elizabeth-Jane exemplifies a more feminine spiritualized form of the same ethical ideology when she discovers the secret “of making limited opportunities endurable” by “cunning enlargement, by a species of microscopic treatment, of those minute forms of satisfaction that offer themselves to everybody not in positive pain” (255). Like George Eliot, Hardy sees his contemporary society as unfavorable breeding grounds for heroic grandeur. His novels present the splendor sought by the discrete individual self as a doomed atavistic relic, a self-defeating aesthetic self-fashioning at great cost. The sober utilitarian attitude to moral practice is in his novels a more assured way to survival, but though his evolutionary meliorism thus valorizes the extra effort needed for adaptation to the changing conditions, such an effort invariably emerges as diminishing a character’s moral stature and flattening his or her aesthetic appeal. The vertical axis of Hardy’s carnivalesque is associated with the rise of an extraordinary personality, inexorably followed by decline and fall. Such personalities (Tess, Eustacia, Henchard, Jude) are not harbingers, not premature specimens of the spiritual future of humanity; on the contrary, they are the belated blossoming of old-time private heroica in which the moral supererogations of the feudal past have been translated into an aestheticized integrity. If in George Eliot’s fiction cultural remissions can be seen as incipient strands of development, in Hardy’s novels they tend to be represented as brief and belated flare-ups of energies that have run down.

In the worlds that Hardy conjures up, the petty, well-regulated, quotidian social ethos is victorious and in no need of artistic redemption. In a sense, Hardy prefigures the late-twentieth-century shift from admiration of the heroism of self-sacrifice to the valorization of survival, everyday care, and endurance. What he does not rise up to is the challenge of finding the perspective that would grant ordinary sociality its own active aesthetic appeal.

The struggle between the life and the death drives in Henchard’s character are an instance of the carnivalesque seesaw reversal in the novel’s thematic

\textsuperscript{15} With reference to Derrida’s notion of writing as pharmakon, medicine and oblivion-inducing poison in one (1981 [1968]), Earl Ingersoll (1990) links Farfrae’s modern business practices, complete with notes and accurate ledgers, to the tendency of personal and cultural forgetfulness, whereas Henchard’s obsolete oral business practices emerge as a lingering cultural memory.
Chapter Seven

structure. A case can be made for a causal relationship between the rise and fall of his fortunes and the victories and defeats of the energies that maintain the discreteness of his identity. It seems, however, that the relationship between the oscillation of the order and anarchy in his character and the deployment of the carnival topoi in the novel’s setting are a matter of congruence rather than of cause.

An insight into this congruence of the syntactics of motifs in the setting, plot, and character psychology can be gained from Jorge Luis Borges’s essay “Narrative Art and Magic” (1972). Borges considers mechanical causality and psychoanalytic determinism unsatisfactory aesthetic principles in the construction of the narrative plot; instead, he suggests that narrative details are linked to each other by magic. Here “magic,” as noted above, is not a metaphor for aesthetic charm, a “grace beyond the reach of art,” but a literal reference to sympathetic magic of the kind discussed in Frazer’s The Golden Bough: like attracts like—and though post hoc is not propter hoc, Eustacia Vye in Hardy’s The Return of the Native dies after an ill-wisher pierces her doll-effigy with a pin. It is therefore not the experience of a character that dictates the choice of images, but the life of the image that may determine the character’s fate: Tess’s murder of Alec at the end of Tess of the d’Urbervilles may seem to be as much a development of the motif of red on white (Alec’s blood on the whitewash) as it is a consequence of her emotional turmoil; Henchard’s self-starvation likewise puts a finishing touch to the dialectics of the magma of immanent will and the principium individuationis that underlies the carnivalesque strands of the novel’s motifs. Demystified, this statement may lead us back to the thematic model of character construction (Phelan 1987; see also p. 108 above). Reversed, it may also lead us to redescribe sympathetic magic (along with its relics in our quotidian pet superstitions) as the workings of the aesthetic impulse in the patterning of human life.

16. Cf. Hardy’s journal entry for June 3, 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” (F. E. Hardy 1928: 198).