

# Motion Sickness: Spectacle and Circulation in Thomas Hardy's "On the Western Circuit"

by John Plotz

Dreading the moment when the inexorable stoker, grimly lurking behind the rococo-work, should decide that this set of riders had had their pennyworth, and bring the whole concern of steam-engine, horses, mirrors, trumpets, drums, cymbals, and such-like to pause and silence, he waited for her every reappearance. ("On the Western Circuit" 246)

The grim stoker, who makes only this one brief appearance in Thomas Hardy's 1891 story, "On the Western Circuit," is the invisible producer of phantasmagoria, embodying all the evils that the steam roundabout's cheery whirl seems to belie. Harmless and beautiful as a ride on the roundabout may seem at first, the reader does not need to have been tutored by "The Fiddler of the Reels" or by the ecstatic dancing scenes in *The Return of the Native* to know that such a face-flushing holiday from reality will do neither its riders nor onlookers any good. "On the Western Circuit" traces meticulously the consequences of one ill-chosen ride: disaster for a housemaid, Anna; for the admiring onlooker who woos her, Charles Bradford Raye; and for her mistress Edith Harnham, who writes Anna's love letters to the peripatetic Charles and falls in love with him herself.

The love triangle may be old, but roundabout love is new. At the story's base is the arrival of a machine that brings urban worries—and urban illusions—into Hardy's rural Wessex. The presence of "steam circuses, as the roundabouts were called by their owners" (245) creates a phantasmagoric effect that engenders a thoroughly mistaken love at first sight, a sort of love impossible in *anteindustrial* Wessex. The steam circuses do not merely conceal some aspect of reality, but create, in a viewer's eye, an illusion that becomes *preferable* to reality. When Charles falls in love with what he thinks he sees of Anna on the roundabout, he sets into motion a chain of events

designed to recreate or to perpetuate the phantasmatic desire.<sup>1</sup> Out of children, young men, old people, and three pretty girls spinning by on the roundabout, Charles Bradford Raye creates a girl he loves madly. And out of the revolving images and counterimages she sees while riding the roundabout, Anna deludes herself into believing she has chosen Charles.

Conceived in a whirl, this love has its existence strengthened and sustained by three subsequent evils, all linked causally, but also poetically, to the roundabout's motion: first, Charles's financial ability to pay for Anna to ride again; second, Charles's job moving with the judicial circuit, which keeps him away so that the enchantment does not wear off; third, a series of letters between Charles and Edith, who eventually pursues a full-blown epistolary romance (under Anna's name) with the absent Charles. A whirl of illusions, in other words, follows on the original visual mistake, allowing a queer emotion—that both *is* and *is not* love—to be created. But in the beginning was the image, born of the roundabout.

Hardy's distrust of the modern and of technological innovations is evidenced in every one of his works. His novels sometimes seem an almost Luddite rejection of the forces of urbanization and mechanization (not to mention transportation) that were in his day rapidly replacing "homogeneous piles of medieval architecture" (244) with more homogeneous piles of slag, and greenswards with suburbs.<sup>2</sup> He deploys a variety of techniques to convey that distrust. He is fond of curious juxtapositions, for example, as his repeated use of French exiles, and English or German soldiers quartered in Wessex makes clear. He also lets drop a great many references to the metaphysical "ache of modernism"; "vague latter-day glooms and popular melancholies" (246) often afflict his fashionable youths. And there are more than a few pilgrimages to London, as when Caroline Aspent and Ned Hipcroft travel up to see the Great Exhibition (in the 1893 "The Fiddler of the Reels"), or Sam Hobson passes through suburban streets at night with loads of vegetables from the country (in "The Son's Veto," also 1893).

<sup>1</sup>Guy Debord introduced, and Jean Baudrillard popularized, the notion of the "simulation." If a "dissimulation" conceals what already exists, a "simulation" produces what had not heretofore existed, but in such a way that it obliterates or replaces the no-longer-ascertainable "real" beneath it. An illusion may be dispelled, even phantasmagoria have only a limited temporal duration (Crary, *Castle*), but a simulation permanently maps mental misapprehension back onto the (seemingly) objective world.

<sup>2</sup>It is not, as Manford opines, a "purely stylistic" change when the description of a Gothic cathedral is changed from "perfect medieval ensemble" to "homogeneous pile" in the final manuscript of "On the Western Circuit" (97). The necessary homogeneity of the Wessex past would be dented by the suggestion that it contained an "ensemble."

In fact, Hardy's descriptions of a general or *epistemic* break between the old and the new are often unforgettable. Take for instance the marvelous description, in "The Fiddler of the Reels," of the significance of 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition:

For South Wessex the year formed in many ways an extraordinary chronological frontier or transit-line, at which there occurred what one might call a precipice in Time. As in a geological "fault," we had presented to us a sudden bringing of ancient and modern into absolute contact, such as probably in no other single year since the Conquest was ever witnessed in this part of the country. (286)

Still, the "excursion trains" that run down into Wessex play a fairly small role in that story—its real center is music's seductive powers. A similar shyness hovers over much of the rest of Hardy's work. Clym Yeobright, for example, is free to go abroad—as long as his experience of Paris is rendered only in a few redolent details. And the city (be it London or Paris) has other ways of coming to those who will not come to it. In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, as Slater points out, "the tentacles of a de-individualising metropolitan culture . . . reach out all over the country" (49); even on the Isle of Slingers, Avice can fall thrall to metropolitan customs, because "those who brought her up [strove] to make her an exact copy of tens of thousands of other people, in whose circumstances there was nothing special, distinctive, or picturesque." But it is rare that there appears any *tangible* avatar of the mobile and mechanical modern age.

What is generally lacking in Hardy, we might say, is any direct representation of those technical advances that bring to outlying counties (as they might to the overseas colonies) a particular object that almost seems dropped from a future age. Guy Debord has aptly named such intrusive objects "star commodities" (45). Debord has in mind things like Coca-Cola in twentieth-century Africa, but a list for the nineteenth century might include striking incursions such as the British railways in India and the telegraph or camera in the French and British African empires. The consequences of such objects pass far beyond their immediate work and function: it is the fact of *discontinuity* implied by their presence that most jars and changes the invaded landscape.

The reader is well warned to look sharp—and well rewarded for doing so—when such an object appears in the work of writers who confronted the approach of modernity with as much mingled dread and curiosity as did Hardy. There are at least two fascinating instances of such an intrusion in Hardy's novels. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Farfrae's glistening sowing machine, "a compound of hornet, grasshopper, and shrimp, magnified enormously" is at once so novel and potentially so useful that "it created about as much sensation in the corn-market as a flying machine

would create at Charing Cross" (238). The threshing machine that Tess feeds in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) is another, a "portable repository of force, round whose hot blackness the morning air quivered" (319).<sup>3</sup> Like the steam roundabout, it exists on quite another level of reality from its pastoral Wessex surroundings: "in a few seconds, [the engineer] could make the long strap move at an invisible velocity. Beyond its extent the environment might be corn, straw or chaos; it was all the same to him" (320). Earlier in the novel, Tess had stood silhouetted against the London milk train. The passage describing her then applies again now: "no object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl, with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause" (212).

In these brief passages, one of the great English conservative thinkers confronts directly a systematic, widespread, and terrifying social change that in almost all of his writing he preferred simply to ignore or to combat indirectly. The description of the steam roundabout in "On the Western Circuit" is no less fascinating, and it has the advantage of being the story's defining moment. The roundabout crystallizes the story's paradigmatic association of whirling motion and London's creeping contamination of England's rural counties. Both *Tess* and *The Mayor* turn quickly away from invasive modern machinery, but in this short story, all of Wessex, like those "revolving" on the roundabout, is trapped somewhere between solid ground and ephemeral rotation.

As its concern with the circulation of goods from an urban core to a rural periphery should suggest, "On the Western Circuit" may be able to provide a way to read Hardy's complicated criticism of modernity in relation to Britain's conceptions of its imperial ventures overseas. Literary critics have recently focused a great deal of critical attention on the presence (via representation, allusion, or indirect influence) of Britain's overseas empire in nineteenth-century literature (Said, Sharpe, Suleri). A careful consideration of the place of the star commodity in the circulating systems of outlying regions of England itself suggests, however, that the relationship between the rural counties and "metropolitan" London also has something to tell critics about the advent of modernity, or its *trickle-down* from capital to outskirts.<sup>4</sup> The role that the *inland* literature of the time has to play in broadening our understanding of the relationship between imperialism and modernity, then,

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<sup>3</sup>Brooks has also noted the connection: she aptly calls the "inexorable stoker" of "On the Western Circuit" a "brother to the engineer in *Tess*" (146).

<sup>4</sup>There have been interesting recent reappraisals of Raymond Williams's work on the country-city binary (Dworkin and Roman, especially Radhakrishnan), while Barrell and Brantlinger both address, albeit in very different ways, the presence of imperial concerns in canonical English writers.

may depend not only on the covert colonial references adduced in such writers as Austen, Brontë, Thackeray, and Dickens, but also upon representations of the struggle between a rural, peripheral past and an increasingly intrusive urban present.<sup>5</sup>

To put it another way, "On the Western Circuit" benefits by being read through the lens Adorno turned on Wagner:

Wagner belongs to the first generation to realize that in a world that has been socialized through and through it is not possible for an individual to alter something that is determined over the heads of men. Nevertheless it was not given to him to call the overarching totality by its real name. In consequence it is transformed for him into myth. (87)

The mythic structure abides in most of Hardy—even in "On the Western Circuit." Hardy begins nonetheless to tell the story of the advent of simulations (moving from London to the provinces), which is also the story of the relinquishment of human autonomy and decision-making to a mechanical structure. Hardy finds (or manufactures) in his Wessex a breathing-space, a space from which to confront a modern life that by 1891 had held London in its thrall a full 60 years. In a space where modernity is *dilatory*, where it is late in arriving, the steam roundabout becomes visible in its full, complicated relationship to other *roundabout* systems of the modern age: to the fiscal system that sends cash to Wessex, and carnivals to gather that cash; to the judicial circuit that wheels Charles through Wessex; and to the postal system that sends letters from Charles to Anna, and from Anna to Edith, and from Edith back to Charles. That same postal system also sends Hardy's manuscripts up to London and his published stories down to subscribers of *The English Illustrated Magazine*. Thomas Hardy himself, the stoker of textual machinery and the "amanuensis" (the book's first title [Manford 95]) of textual lovers, is part of the spin cycle too.

The steam roundabout exists on a slightly different plane of reality from its surroundings: it is "in the agricultural world, but not of it" (*Tess* 319). We might say that it systematically distorts visual stimuli around it. Debord's definition of "spectacle" is relevant here, especially given Thomas Hardy's notable concern with distinguishing between work and play:

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<sup>5</sup>In "On the Western Circuit" we might say that the power of imperious, imperial London is "reflected sharply" into rural Wessex—much as the roar of steam roundabout noise is bounced to Charles's ear off the "homogeneous pile of . . . the Close" in the story's opening paragraph (244). In this analogy, the steam roundabout is the modern world, the "homogeneous pile" is Wessex, the noise is Hardy's stories, and readers are—like Charles—the victims of a roar reflected from the gaudy intrusive circus of the modern age.

The spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. (18)<sup>6</sup>

What is seen on the roundabout is disconnected from any of the ordinary *standards* by which any sensory input can be judged. Vision gains some unquantifiable added essence.

The results of the roundabout's visual *plus-power* are enormous, ranging from Charles's paying for (one) young beauty to continue riding the roundabout, to the judicial circuitry wheeling young Charles away at just the right (or wrong) moment, to the eventual entire misguided correspondence. But the salient fact is that all of these later misuses of three entirely different circulatory systems of the world—money, the judicial circuitry, and letter writing—are the results of an initial visual misapprehension. All the subsequent trouble can be indirectly traced back to the original spectacular mistake, the thing seen that not only was not there, but could never even have been *imagined* without the roundabout.

#### *Vision*

The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly) naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs. The most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. (Debord 18)

Vision, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, is credited with almost mystical powers and acknowledged as the site of imponderable occurrences: occurrences, that is, that cannot be weighed against other sensory input. That visual imponderability, or *incommensurability*, and the corresponding rise in fascination with mechanical phantasmagoria, opens up an entire sphere of the world that can neither be "brought back into focus" nor "brought back to earth" (Castle 30). If the fascination of mechanical phantasmagoria partially depended on the knowledge that they were not "real" ghosts but "only" optical illusions, their allure was only heightened by

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<sup>6</sup>As Elaine Scarry has argued, Hardy's "deepest sympathies belong to the realm of work rather than the realm of play" (92). Charles's actions, however, are situated somewhere in between. Scarry postulates a world in which work consists of "ongoing activity," but Charles's work as peripatetic clerk is sustained only in its *disentanglement* from its material surroundings—most permanent in its dislocation, and most perfectly accomplished in his departure. Thus, it is entirely apt that he should choose his nightly recreation in the provinces, as he does in the book's opening paragraph, by idly *moving* from "architecture in the dark" to "throbbing humanity in full light" (245).

the realization that this merely transplanted the realm of the eerie into the subjective mind: made alchemy psychology.

Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* documents the rise of interest in the phantasmagoric and illusionary and the era's increasingly strange and vivid speculations on the science of optics. A chart in Johannes Muller's *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen* (1833), for example, lists all the agencies capable of producing the sensation of sight. After mechanical abrasions, electrical influx, chemicals, and blood, photons are ranked a poor fifth, and with this caveat: "although they [photons] may have many other actions than this; for instance they effect chemical changes, and are the means of maintaining the chemical processes in plants" (90). Muller also goes on to document the effects on the other sense that the aforementioned stimuli may have (effects that do not correspond to their effect on vision). What is being created is a world of hermetically riven senses, in which there is no reason that any one sense can serve as standard for another.

The idea that the senses are, or indeed *ought* to be, integrated to each other is related to the notion of an ordered and known social setting. It is reasonable to expect to be able to relate visual and auditory stimuli—to pick the easiest example—when spending one's days in a landscape where every sound and sight is known. There, the song of a bird can be matched up with the appropriate tree, and the tractor on the horizon explains a characteristic buzz. But (and here Hardy tends to desert us, since the modern city is not his usual bailiwick) in man-made and technology-rich realms, there is little hope of integrating the senses or of judging the failings of one sense by reference to another.<sup>7</sup> In an integrated world, neither roundabout nor correspondence would have entered Anna's life. Even if they had, in Hardy's Wessex—a world of continuities and traces of permanence, not intermittent arrivals and departures—most such interruptions (the thresher and the sowing machine) can be shrugged off. In this story, though, they linger, and they matter.

Fragmented or dissociated vision is the explanatory key to the phantasmatic effect in "On the Western Circuit." What Charles Bradford Raye and Anna see on the kaleidoscopic roundabout—he watching her ride, she watching him and the world revolve—is a visual phantasm, an irreproducible and finally inexplicable occurrence. The illusion is its own litmus-test, and its own judge. A self-validating vision in a world that has given up holding one sense accountable to the good advices or comparisons other senses could provide.

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<sup>7</sup>In a nineteenth-century train, for example, even inside a carriage, vision predominates over sound. Moreover both in turn are quite alienated and separable from the bone-jarring "railway shock" that tells the sense of touch that something quite different is occurring from what the sight and hearing report (Schivelbusch 139–49).

In fact, the description of Charles watching Anna seems to derive from the experience of watching a “phenakistiscope” (literally “deceptive view”), a device that had been around since the 1830s. As Crary describes it,

It consisted of a single disc, divided into eight or sixteen equal segments, each of which contained a small slitted opening and a figure, representing one position in a sequence of movement. The side with the figures drawn on it was faced toward a mirror while the viewer stayed immobile as the disc turned. When an opening passed in front of the eye, it allowed one to see the figure on the disc very briefly. The same effect occurs with each of the slits. Because of retinal persistence, a series of images results that appears to be in continuous motion before the eye. (109–10)

While the scene may not have been written with a phenakistiscope specifically in mind, Hardy certainly intended to convey the idea of rushing pictures forming a continuous gestalt. Charles is described catching glimpses of various country figures spinning by:

The revolving figures passed before his eyes with an unexpected and quiet grace in a throng whose natural movements did not suggest gracefulness or quietude as a rule. By some contrivance there was imparted to each of the hobby-horses a motion which really was the triumph and perfection of roundabout inventiveness—a galloping rise and fall, so timed that, of each pair of steeds, one was on the spring while the other was on the pitch. The riders were quite fascinated by these equine undulations in this most delightful holiday-game of our times. There were riders as young as six, and as old as sixty years, with every age in between. At first it was difficult to catch a personality, but by and by the observer’s eyes centered on the prettiest girl out of the several pretty ones revolving. (246)

The most obvious comparison of roundabout to phenakistiscope here is in its commercial and voyeuristic potential. The delight afforded here is not the *rider’s* sense of speed, but the fact that the London viewer (and the London reader of Hardy’s stories as well) can see provincials *slowed down*, “quietized” by the mechanical contraption, a mechanization that paradoxically seems more natural (that is, pleasing in its smooth modulations) to him than their “natural movements.” Moreover, the inventiveness that gives a sense of continuity is also clearly an arbitrary mechanical one, caused by the steady progression of pitching and springing horses at just the right rate to please the eye. The multitudes of individuals have become, by stepping onto this roundabout, part of its smooth mechanical function.

Only after its visual pace is established—it is significant that the eye of Charles, trained or overtrained by London, is set to catch that pace quickest of all those present—can one “catch a personality”:

It was not that one with the light frock and light hat whom he had been at first attracted by; no it was the one with the black cape, grey skirt, light gloves and—no, not even she, but the one behind her; she with the crimson skirt, dark jacket, brown hat and brown gloves. Unmistakably that was the prettiest girl. (246)

The moment of selection rests on a double mistake. She is, literally, the third prettiest girl: he has run through the salient characteristics of each girl, only to settle on the hindmost. While the entire roundabout may not form a single coherent spinning image, it seems clear that these three are visually linked, like the quickly changing but coherent illusion produced by the spinning images (quite often horses) on a phenakistiscope.<sup>8</sup> In Muller's terms, the phantasm of the steam-roundabout has no basis in an enduring reality, but is instead *constitutive* of a new (internal) reality. Charles indeed *sees* a beautiful girl, but only out of manufactured optical effects. And when Anna's eyes "dance" from the motion of the steam roundabout, their "dance" picks out from the world a beautiful young man with whom she exchanges "that unmistakable expression" that is, like anything else in this "undulating, dazzling, lurid universe," manufactured in the eye of the beholder (248).

Only a few more of Charles's observations are pertinent: "Having finally selected her, this idle spectator studied her as well as he was able during each of her brief transits across his visual field" (246). We might say that what he actually studies is the fact of *difference* itself. The three girls with their varying accessories—frocks, capes, hats and skirts—create a set of homogenous differences ("infinite variation within the form") out of which one girl must become, by sheer force of contrast, the "prettiest." In each pass, Charles studies something a good deal more complicated than the lineaments of a single face, an irony that is made yet more obvious by the claim that "he had never seen a fairer product of nature, and at each round she made a deeper mark on his sentiments" (246). What has been constructed here is palpably not a product of nature; and the juxtaposition of the appositive, "his select county beauty" in the line above only reinforces the durability of this whirling simulation: together he, she, and the machine have made a new sort of sensation.

The innovation in sensation is reflected as well in Anna's account of the ride. When she speaks, it is to stress the ride's novelty: "'O yes!' she said, with dancing eyes. 'It has been quite unlike anything I have ever felt in my

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<sup>8</sup>Angel tells Tess at one point, "The woman I have been loving is not you, but another woman in your shape," suggesting a misfit between an outer shape (pure, presumably) and an inner content (impure). In this story, however, the misprision is all on the surface and all the more thorough for that: three woman and a whirl have produced beauty that is afterward attributed to one woman alone.

life before!" (247). The "dancing eyes" seem also to be an aftereffect of the spinning. It might even be argued that the constant motion introduced into the text in general—the residuum of the roundabout—makes "dancing" (or dazed) eyes ultimately a prerequisite for the entire story.

Anna's reaction serves to remind us that the mystification of the roundabout is not unidirectional. "The lives of Hardy's characters are as frequently disrupted by their acts of observation as they are by being spied upon" (Levine 537). During her second turn on the roundabout, Anna finds in the young man what he has already found in her: some semantic content for the glorious spectacle, a *locus amoenus* for all the exhilaration of a new sort of visual stimulus:

Then the pleasure-machine started again, and to the light-hearted girl, the figure of the handsome young man, the market-square with its lights and crowd, the houses beyond, and the world at large, began moving round as before, countermoving in the revolving mirrors on her right hand, she being as it were the fixed point in an undulating, dazzling, lurid universe, in which loomed forward most prominently of all the form of her late interlocutor. (247–48)

A world of buzzing sensation provides the pleasure that is conveniently deposited in the one nearby site of "legitimate" pleasure: a marriageable young man. All the thrill of the machine has accrued to the benefit of a nearby human host.<sup>9</sup> That the pleasure of motion seems to work to the benefit of that man is one of the deceptions built into the roundabout. The joy that is scaled and supplied by machine can never be accommodated (in Hardy's economy) to the man who seems to be there so conveniently to receive it.

It is true that such female dazzlement occurs elsewhere in Hardy, "The Fiddler of the Reels" and the dance scene in *The Return of the Native* being only two of the most prominent examples. But those other intoxications are auditory, and moreover embedded in a long tradition. Adorno is right to

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<sup>9</sup>The arbitrariness of this choice has a series of successors in Modernist literature: for example, in Forster's *Howards End* both Schlegel sisters fall in love with the Wilcoxes as an ensemble and an institution, before either fixes on one particular, *marriageable* Wilcox. Forster is an apt comparison because his writing too, in its not-quite-modernist form, resists what he conceives of as the impending arbitrariness of "something that is determined over the heads of men." Whether that *something* is the power of the Imperial and West Africa Rubber company to control what the disappearing will of the Schlegels no longer can, or the creation of Helen and Margaret's individual desires in a complicated conglomeration of landscape, action, and family, Forster is as interested as Hardy in isolating the outside influence and at least drawing it to someone's attention—though he cannot stop it.

speak of the normalizing powers of a myth, and the myth used by Hardy to explain fiddling enchantment is the ecstatic powers of the fairy fiddle.<sup>10</sup> With these new visual phantasmagoria, the consequences are a good deal more serious, and there is no standard myth of visual enchantment around to smooth things over again.

A remarkable event occurs here: the purely intangible, and irreproducible thrill of the world viewed in motion is, for Anna and Charles, solidified in the form of *each other*. They think they are falling in love, but they have actually made the first of many mistaken identifications in this story—they have confused the thrill of motion with the thrill of romance and cut the cloth of their romance to a machine-made form. It is not merely that they are ill-suited to each other, it is that they—or any two human beings, Hardy seems to say—are by nature incapable of bearing the representational burden of living up to an illusory love born on a steam-driven machine, of trying to suit their "live lips to a plummet-measured" ideal. This young couple has been formed, and will unhappily live, in the image of a machined dream. "Machine-made castings depart by degrees from the sharp hand-work of a mould," Hardy writes in his preface to *Wessex Tales*, but no departure is available for these two castoffs of the roundabout—at least, no departure from each other.

### *Circulation*

Circulation is both cyclical and progressive, concerned both with motion *around* and motion *forward*. In "On the Western Circuit," three systems—money, the judicial circuit, and the exchange of letters—become accomplices after the fact to the deceptive simulation engendered at the roundabout. The workings of both fiscal and judicial circulation serve as Hardy's useful introduction to the more complicated and more potentially dangerous postal circulation that perpetuates the triple deceit of Anna, Charles, and Edith.

#### *a. Money*

Money is there at the roundabout, if not producing then at least sustaining the original blur. When Charles buys Anna a third ride, he seals their flirtation as more than a mere visual *frisson*: the cash sends their relationship into the realm of possible futurity, making it one of those things "that means so little at the moment, yet so often leads up to passion, heart-ache, union, disunion, devotion, overpopulation, drudgery, content, resignation, despair" (248).

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<sup>10</sup>William Butler Yeats's exactly contemporary Red Hanrahan stories contain similar scenes of musical enchantment. That enchantment's time-honored place within the accepted forms and mores of an older era means that seductions or abductions performed under its auspices are less shocking, even less morally egregious, than modern techniques of befuddlement would be.

“‘Ha-ha!’ laughed the young man in unison, and gallantly producing his money she was enabled to whirl on again” (248).<sup>11</sup> The fiscal system has been abused here—it is cash that enables Charles to continue the (simulated) pleasure he is taking in her motion, a pleasure that is formed in sending her *away*, not in keeping her near him. Hardy’s ethical code might countenance Charles’s paying—in the form of sweets, presents, etc.—for the pleasure of her presence, but he is paying instead for the pleasure of her absence, of her reengulfment by the machinery.

This moment bespeaks the contamination of a fiscal system that had managed, prior to the roundabout, to fortify rather than to imperil conventional mores. This fiscal contamination is precisely *not* paradigmatic of Hardy’s other work. The ways that money is naturalized in the rest of Hardy are various—when gambling at night takes place by glowworm in *The Return of the Native*, for instance, the gold pieces, dice, and worms are all integrated into a syncretic moment that produces something like a natural casino. And even when money does strike one as noticeably an alien power at work in Hardy, its allure is immediately diminished by the unsympathetic actions it provokes. Consider Donald Farfrae’s loss of self-control as he rhapsodizes to Lucetta about his style of profit-making:

And so by contenting myself with small profits frequently repeated, I soon made five hundred pounds—yes!—(bringing down his hand upon the table and quite forgetting where he was)—while the others by keeping theirs in hand made nothing at all! (122)

Money takes Farfrae, as it were, *far* from the emotional *fray* at this moment. In talking of his profits, Farfrae fails to charm Lucetta. In much of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, therefore, the fiscal propensities of Farfrae are restrained by his larger desire for concord with the community.

Money used to pay to prolong the spectacle in “On the Western Circuit,” however, carves for itself no such benign avenue towards normalization. In its first use, as in the later deployment of the judicial and postal systems, money precisely *alienates* the two who are using it, deferring the conversation (not held till after the wedding) that would undeceive Charles and Anna as to each other’s pre-simulation identity.

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<sup>11</sup>The grammatical oddity of that sentence—there is no originary subject for “gallantly producing”—works to lend further systematic anonymity to the fiduciary transaction.

*b. Justice*

The judicial circuit too becomes a *post facto* accomplice to deceit and its credibility suffers accordingly. One can easily imagine Hardy finding ways to take the notion of a judicial circuit in stride, to treat it as part of Wessex proper, and not an alien invasion: there are many magistrates in his books, there is some justice done at London, even several royal visits to Wessex that do not imperil social stability. But after the tragically wrong object-choice of affection made by Anna, Edith and Charles (literally an object choice, since the sex appeal rests not in people but in a machine), the judicial circuit too becomes a culpable *machina ex machina*.

We are well warned of its malign nature by the first mention of Charles's place in the grand (vocational) scheme of things:

Who would have supposed him to be Charles Bradford Raye, Esquire, stuff-gownsmen, educated at Wintoncester, called to the bar at Lincoln's-Inn, now going to the Western Circuit, merely detained in Melchester by a small arbitration after his brethren had moved on to the next county-town? (248)

Charles's work has to date literally been a *career*, from Wintoncester to Lincoln's Inn to Melchester to the Western Circuit, an education and profession formed on the fly. And a life shaped to take advantage of that fact: he reminds himself at one point that romance is completely permissible because his migrations will keep him out of the reach of any girl who wants to track him. (Hardy explains with a wonderful neologism: "the *interspace* of a hundred miles—which to a girl of her limited capabilities was like a thousand—would effectually hinder this summer fancy from greatly encumber-ing his life" [253].) The reader knows that Charles, like a fiddler of the (urban) reels, can keep himself in exactly the sort of circuitous motion he so loves to see *simulated* (in the "leisure-activity" of which the new age turns out to have a boundless supply) on the roundabout.

The irony here bears stressing, for it bridges the apparent gap between—to borrow Elaine Scarry's terms—play and work (93). Lucetta calls the sowing machine in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* "a sort of agricultural piano" (238), a phrase that captures perfectly the "interspace" it occupies between the worlds of work and of play. The roundabout figures both work and play as well, for in its *purposeless* whirl, the *purposive* movement of Charles on the circuit returns in fetishized form. It is only when Charles sees that whirl served up as a star commodity, as an entertainment, that he can properly taste

its delights. The roundabout's aesthetic appeal is founded on a displaced identification with Charles's perpetual circuitousness.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the profession in which Charles is firmly entrapped necessitates, it turns out, a wife who will "convey," a wife educated enough to "move" with the times and so keep Charles on his inexorable spiral, out on the circuits and then up into the mobile coils of power.<sup>13</sup> At the story's end, therefore, when Charles imagines himself in a galley, "the fastidious urban . . . chained to work for the remainder of his life, with her, the unlettered peasant, chained to his side" (268), it is the *restricted* mobility that galls him most: how he might have moved with a lettered wife, with that indefinable something her letters had—how little circulation on the circuit he can hope for now.

### c. Letters

In the gale of mystification and deceit blown outward from the roundabout, even epistolary communication falls under suspicion. All along we have known Charles and Anna were wrong for each other—their forced physical intimacy only a temporary byblow of their whirlwind courtship. Now their mistaken union produces as consequence the most physicalized example of "body and soul" separation: Edith becomes the soul of Anna, writing love letters to help her illiterate servant win back Charles. As Pether puts it, Edith changes from "protector to pander" (35).

Hardy refuses to show the reader any samples of Edith's letters themselves, merely asserting their "inspiration," their odd intuition of exactly the right thing to say, their ability to calculate beyond calculation into the

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<sup>12</sup>Scarry says of play that it allows "separability" (95). Although Raye is finally unable to dis sever himself from the two women he has seduced, the work he takes part in partially justifies a playful indifference to the fate of those he has seen only on the move. The material traces Charles leaves in Wessex—a pregnancy, letters, a marriage and an illicit kiss after marriage—disguise themselves in the story as courtship, but their real implications are also *economic*. That is, courtship certainly takes center stage, but it does so in order to justify and perpetuate a narrative partially *vocational*—what kind of man would take such a itinerant job, what kind of new men is modernity fashioning?—and partially *regional*—what can it mean for an illiterate country woman to forsake the limited certainties of her hometown for "lodgings, newly taken in a new suburb" (265)?

<sup>13</sup>Benedict Anderson accurately describes the spiral upward to power in England's empire, the movement through various colonial (or, in this case, provincial) postings necessary for the ambitious young functionary looking eventually to "rise" in London (9–20). By the story's end, Charles and Anna have only made it as far as the suburbs, where they will presumably stick, like several other unhappy characters in *Life's Little Ironies*, the collection in which this story appeared in 1893.

heart of Charles.<sup>14</sup> These letters (unlike the many other sorts of documents that Hardy quite freely "extracts from" in other works, among them valentines in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and marmalade-jar slogans or religious slogans painted on rocks in *Tess*) are *irreproducible* on the printed page in exactly the same way that the roundabout experience is. They participate in an economy of *incommensurability*, which only comes into being after the initial incommensurability of the roundabout vision. The "niceness," "inspiration," and "telepathy" that Charles and Anna praise in these letters can affect those of us *outside* the charmed circle of the vision as little as a spectacular phantasmatic effect would affect those outside its *camera obscura*. The letters can no more be reproduced as mere words on a page than the vision of Anna or of Charles on that roundabout could be reduced to a series of pictures.<sup>15</sup> "On the Western Circuit" asserts that in certain situations—when the characters have gone too far into this realm of simulation and deceit—even verbal creations cannot be recreated verbally.

It is of course true that the difference between the initial ingenuous misreading of the figures on the roundabout and the later intentional deception by mail has substantial ethical weight for Hardy: the blame for the roundabout deception is *diffuse*, while there are clear culprits in this latter affectation of affection. This exchange of letters, however, is *simulation* rather than dissimulation, and this works to make the occurrence at the roundabout and the exchange of "false" letters seem quite closely interrelated. That is, Edith may start out only feigning love in letters, but the continuing correspondence creates the very love (inside her) that it is intended merely to falsify. The mouth-to-mouth kiss that Edith exchanges with Charles just *after* he has married Anna affirms that (267). It is not only that the simulation of letter-writing mimics that simulation of affection that takes place at the roundabout; it is also that this secondary deceit can take place only because the roundabout scene touched off events in the first place.

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<sup>14</sup>There is an additional *explicit* attraction to Edith's letters. They are awash with "self-sacrifice," a sacrifice made easy by the fact that Edith, the actual writer, is "sacrificing" not herself but Anna. That is, Edith is able to find the words to persuade Charles to marry the pregnant Anna because she is writing to him "concerning a corporeal condition that was not Edith's at all," so that if she writes "from the promptings of her own heart" she also writes out of a calculating understanding of the promptings of Anna's womb as well (261).

<sup>15</sup>This is reminiscent of the debate that raged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about whether images could be reduced to verbal equivalents, or whether verbal propositions could be turned into pictorial or visual images (Mitchell). Compare also Turner's arresting paintings of angels, which to Cary represent the *impossibility* of signification (143).

The turn to epistolary production—the system Hardy would have been most reluctant to admit could be contaminated by the modern and yet clearly the system the *most* affected in this story—returns us inevitably to Hardy himself and to the image this paper started with: the inexorable stoker. As the grim stoker turns the roundabout, as Charles circles from Wintoncester to London to Melchester, as Anna spins on her horse and then spins out an epistolary lie, as Edith circulates false letters, so too the story itself *circles* in a slow spiral progression, leaping forward and then “returning now” (255) to chronicle a past event elsewhere. At the heart of this story is Hardy’s desperate fear, and partial conviction, that he too is like that stoker. A man in a machine grimly producing and controlling the pleasures of his riders, supplying the motive force for the whirl, but unable himself to be anything but a wizened precipitate of everything that his images are not: not carefree but careful; not beautiful but ugly; not female (like Hardy’s most sympathetic protagonists) but male; not a semi-lettered peasant but an all-too-knowing professional.<sup>16</sup>

Were Hardy to have stayed completely silent on modern technical incursions into a retrograde Wessex, we would be justified in begging the question of authorial moral culpability. But we should feel free to interrogate closely the representations he does give us. “On the Western Circuit” is immanently an expression of Hardy’s anxiety about his own authorship. A printing press, like a thresher, can make its “long strap move at an invisible velocity” (*Tess* 319) to turn agricultural products into grain for London’s greedy maw. Most of the time, Hardy can make himself, like that strap, invisible when he works—but not always. Hardy wrote “On the Western Circuit” out of a tortured suspicion that his own act of representation/creation might be part and parcel of the London-based, train-imported modern world he strove so hard to keep away from his Wessex.<sup>17</sup> In circula-

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<sup>16</sup>At the time he wrote these stories, Hardy lived in Dorset but “continued to spend five months [in London] every year” (Hill 14–15)—although he believed that “residence in or near a city tended to force *mechanical* and ordinary productions from his pen” (emphasis added; *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* 154).

<sup>17</sup>Brooks goes slightly astray in saying that “Charles Raye, Anna and her mistress [whirl] into a merry-go-round of cross-purposes and passions as arbitrary as” the stoker’s whim (146). The cross-purposes are all too motivated, the passions all too aptly manufactured out of the visual deceit that Hardy both deplores and employs.

ting stories of that half-conjured and half-represented Wessex, Hardy takes part in the inherently mendacious modern systems that perpetuate desires—and stories—far from their destined, their original, "spots in time." He both craves and dreads to do so.<sup>18</sup>

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