

Hardy's Rural Modernity

M.Phil. in Modern and Contemporary Literature

Core 1: Texts and Contexts, 1830-1914

Week 5 Seminar: Dr Edward Allen

The contrast between silence and sound, darkness and light, like that between summer and winter, was more strongly marked than it is in our lives. The modern town hardly knows silence or darkness in their purity, nor the effect of a solitary light or a single distant cry.

Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*

Johan Huizinga's study of the continental Renaissance begins as so many cultural histories do – in the elegiac mood, and with a lone bellow into the unknown. Huizinga's sense of a lost world is likely to strike a familiar chord with those who know and shuttle between the 'modern town' and its bucolic antipode, and it is one that has come to figure conspicuously in scholarly attempts to excavate the rich media ecology of the long nineteenth century. 'The rural peals of the nineteenth century, which have become for us the sound of another time,' laments Alain Corbin, 'were *listened to*, and evaluated according to a system of affects that is now lost to us'. As for Huizinga, so for Corbin, listening is not what it was, because we live now in an age of immaterial communality, of social networks and data compression – worlds away, it would seem, from the pealing of soundscapes past.

The purpose of this seminar, in the first instance, will be to debate and critique this strain of critical grief. Corbin's nineteenth century was by no means a closed or stable imaginarium, and its structures of communication – from bells to electric telegraphy – were always already susceptible to rival systems of affect and pleasure. Thomas Hardy, the subject of our enquiry, was wise to the 'difference between burgh and champaign', though little has been done to explain his writing as a product or species of rural modernity, a formulation that is just beginning to gain traction in modernist studies. Our focus will be Hardy's late and much-neglected novel, *The Well-Beloved* (1897), which we'll read in tandem with an earlier instantiation of the tale, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in the closing months of 1892. In doing so, we will attend to the ways Hardy's novel was marketed in its own time as 'a sketch of a temperament' – a story that has to do with distance and desire, as J. Hillis Miller once put it, and one that seeks to articulate that antagonism by reflecting upon the pulse and measure of urban-pastoral networking. We'll be thinking, then, about things like telegraphy and railways, street-life and island-life; and we'll be touching too on objects of various kinds – sex objects and art objects – with a view to working out why Hardy was constantly drawn, literally as well as imaginatively, to the culture of London and away from his rural habitat.

Familiarity with both of the Hardy texts is essential – please acquire the texts well in advance – and those attending the seminar are also required to read the essays noted below under 'Contexts'; copies of these essays will be provided in due course.

Core Texts

Hardy, Thomas, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well Beloved*, ed. Patricia Ingham (New York: Penguin, 1997).

Contexts

Ford, Mark, *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 9.

Miller, J. Hillis, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), chapter 5.

Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage, 2016 [1973]), chapters 1, 2, 18 and 19.

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