



From a Metaphysics of Presence to the Blessings of Absence: The Medial Construction of Masculine Identity in Thomas Hardy's Novel *Jude the Obscure*

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Jude the Obscure is not only Thomas Hardy's last but probably also his bleakest novel. Already its epigram on the frontispiece – namely "The letter killeth [but the spirit giveth life]" – can be read as having negative forebodings; it can, however, also be interpreted as a commentary on the 'nature' of language and on the absolute necessity of understanding its founding mechanisms such as absence, difference and deferral if one is to lead a happy and meaningful life and if one endeavors to claim the freedom and the responsibility to construct one's own identity. The subject of this paper thus centers on the extent to which Hardy's protagonist Jude Fawley, a man who desperately clings to the illusion of a transcendental signified, is able to understand and put into practice Hardy's epigram, which does no less than set forth a 'medial', i.e. linguistic, program for the novel in general as well as for its protagonist in particular. In this sense, the focus of inquiry will be the up to now largely neglected discursive construction of an ill-fated male identity in a discursive universe where "nobody did come, because nobody does" (J, p. 31) and where taking words literally has lethal consequences.

It is certainly surprising that a closer look at the hundreds of articles, essays and monographs about *Jude the Obscure*¹ reveals that most of these publications tend to ignore the eponymous hero of the novel and concentrate instead on Sue Bridehead, "perhaps the most remarkable feminine portrait in the English novel" (Southerington, 1971, p. 145). One eminent critic, Mary Jacobus, even speaks of "Sue the Obscure" (Jacobus, 1975, p. 305), and in a letter Thomas Hardy himself called his novel "the Sue story" (Boumelha, 1982, p. 138). Given this evident neglect of, or even discrimination against, the male protagonist in Hardy studies, it seems appropriate to shift the focus of critical attention. Not, however, back to the humanist phallic and integrated self (Moi, 1990, p. 8), but to a male identity which is insecure, fractured and fraught with problems.

Considering the norms and social codes of the 19th century, there can be no doubt that Jude leads a very unconventional and even progressive life. In contrast to a character such as Michael Henchard in the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Jude appears to consist of a complex blend of traditionally male and female attributes and continues to seek a semblance of security throughout his life in a world which clearly "has become unmoored from natural certitude" and in which "to the unappeased spirit in search of articulate paradigms, nothing – not even the body's native stresses – can be reliably categorized" (Weinstein, 1984, p. 139).² Lured primarily by the enigmatic Sue Bridehead, Jude is propelled into a kind of obscurity which renders his identity as well as his sexuality highly problematic. If this is an extremely unhappy situation for Hardy's male protagonist, it does have the advantage that it puts the reader in a position first to realize and then to further explore the fact that "all labels that 'ticket' a person, especially the most common ones of gender and class, are false" (Higonnet, 1993, p. 4).

Applying traditional male and female stereotypes (Grimm-Horlacher, 2002, pp. 42-58), there can be little doubt that the two main protagonists in *Jude the Obscure* are characterized by an odd combination of what Linda Dowling calls "male effeminacy and female mannishness" (Dowling, 1979, p. 445). The overriding consensus in the secondary literature is "[that] Sue assumes the attitudes of the decisive Victorian male", while "Jude appears to take on the qualities of the submissive Victorian wife" (Mickelson, 1976, p. 5). And in Hardy's novel, Jude is indeed depicted as "a ridiculously affectionate fellow" (J, p. 85), as "thin-skinned", "horribly sensitive" and as the born victim; he even complains about being a man and is looking for a partner on whom "he can lean on and look up to" (Mickelson, 1976, p. 138). In the following, I do not intend to offer yet another analysis of male and female stereotypes, which Hardy's novel effectively questions and transgresses anyway, but shall instead adopt a psychoanalytically inspired Men's Studies approach before asking in how far Jude's failure is caused by his desperate clinging to the illusion of a transcendental signified, and in particular by a defective understanding of writing.

Men's studies and the discursive construction of identity

Although there has been an increase in interest in Men's Studies during the last decades – Susan Bassnett and Gisela Ecker (1996) even speak of a "groundswell of interest in [...] the multifacetedness of masculinity" (p. 100) –, work on masculinity is still an almost negligible quantity in comparison to the amount of research being done on women in the field of Gender Studies. As Peter F. Murphy (1994) argues, men are only just beginning "to articulate a critical analysis of masculinity in contemporary culture and in modern literature. More recent, and sometimes more radical, books have been written by sociologists, psychologists, and historians, not literary or cultural critics" (p. 4). In addition to this, "the literature on men and masculinity is hopelessly at odds with itself," and Men's Studies are still very much a kind of "unsurveyed territory" (Clatterbaugh, 1990, p. 1f.). As R. W. Connell (1995)

argues, "most popular books about men are packed with muddled thinking which either ignores or distorts the results of the growing research on the issues" (p. ix), and "[t]hough most social science is indeed about men, good-quality research that brings *masculinity* into focus is rare. Ironically, most recent studies are not up to the standard set by several researchers in the 1950s" (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987, p. 64).

If we leave aside the more sociologically oriented branch of Men's Studies and concentrate on approaches inspired by deconstruction, post-Freudian psychoanalysis and discourse analysis, we have to state that the majority of these studies supports the approach that male as well as female identities are to be thought of as subject positions and as relational, performative and linguistic constructs. However, if sexual identities are subject to the structures of language, this does – pace Foucault – not necessarily mean that they are totally bereft of any possibility of agency or that the body becomes irrelevant. Whereas medical research has demonstrated that bodies are not always unambiguously sexed and that one should probably speak of a continuum and not of a dichotomy as far as femininity and masculinity are concerned,³ cultural anthropology makes clear that bodies are always gendered and that this gendering is oriented towards the creation or exaggeration of difference (Gilmore, 1991, p. 25). If there is no denying that there is a body, we can, as Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler and others have shown, nevertheless not be sure whether we can ever have access to a 'natural' body, i.e. a body outside language and culture, and to what extent this 'natural' body is really important as far as the construction of identity – which is always a sexual identity – is concerned (Fink, 1995, pp. 105, 123).

In the following, I am mainly interested in the way the individual, in this case the 'fictional entity' Jude Fawley, is positioned within the different fields of discourses and sign systems which constitute culture and which, by offering different subject positions, influence and shape (sexual) identity. In accordance with Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, language is thereby not conceived of as a prison house (Fredric Jameson) but as "a site of liberation from the restrictions [...] imposed upon subjectivity" and as the major means for a creative construction of identity. If it is in the gap between the potential capacities of a differential code and any particular specification of it, i.e. between language (*langue*) and enunciation (*parole*), that the arena of subjectivity and freedom resides (Ermarth, 2000, p. 411), then it should be possible a) to demonstrate that Jude's identity as a man is the result of linguistic constructs, and b) that this identity (nevertheless) can be conceived of as "multiplied" and as a kinetic process. From this perspective Jude's subjectivity would become a

particular expression of systemic value, 'above all, an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act,' the 'very expression' of responsibility, not something independent of it. Identity [...] has nothing to do with reducing difference [...]. Rather, identity appears only in the act of specifying sets of rules. And as we operate simultaneously in several sets at once, identity appears as the

series of constantly multiplied specifications of the potential provided by those rule regimens. (Ermarth, 2000, p. 411)

To reformulate 'the subject' as an element of such differential systems, that is, as a function of discourse, means to accept the multiplicity of what used to be called 'the subject': because subjectivity always operates simultaneously in several discursive systems, whether their grammars and elements are verbal languages or other sign systems composed of gender relations, or fashion, or politics. (Ermarth, 2000, p. 410)

Jude's singularity would then not exist in some essential 'subject' but "in the unique and unrepeatable sequence of a life," while his "palimpsestuousness" would derive "from the multiplied discursive condition in which each moment involves a complex subjective specification of multiple codes" (Ermarth, 2000, p. 411f.). This conception, moreover, allows for "a kinetic subjectivity-in-multicoded-process," i.e. for a subjectivity which is thought of as

the moving nexus or intersection at which a unique and unrepeatable sequence is constantly being specified from the potentials available in the discursive condition. Such a subjectivity is individual in its sequence, not in some irreducible core. Its uniqueness lies in its trajectory: the lifelong sequence, impossible to anticipate, within which an unpredictable series of specifications are made from among the languages available. The volatility of language – its resonance, its power of poetic, associative linkage – provides precisely the varied opportunities for selective specification that constitute the unique and unrepeatable poetry of a life. (Ermarth, 2000, p. 412)

The application of this approach to *Jude the Obscure* leads to an interpretation which endeavors to demonstrate that Hardy's novel conceives of masculinity primarily as a medial (in the sense of linguistic) construct and that Jude's 'tragic' fate – if it is tragic at all⁴ – is not the result of Hardy's alleged negativity and pessimism but can be read as the consequence of Jude's desperate clinging to the illusion of a transcendental signified.

With its epigram, "The letter killeth [but the spirit giveth life]", which is echoed later in the text by Jude's desperate "we are acting by the letter; and 'the letter killeth!'" (J, p. 388), Hardy's novel not only refers to the Bible but also obliquely to its own textuality as well as to the relation between society, language and the law. And it is exactly this relation which is of prime importance in the novel as well as in the interior psychic space of its protagonist. Hence, *Jude the Obscure* can be read as a book about the importance of internalized laws and the linguistic or semiotic construction of sexual identity. Therefore we must ask whether Jude's failure as a man and as a human being cannot best be explained by his deficient understanding of how signs work. From this it follows that the negativity and

bleakness of *Jude the Obscure* would not reside in a hostile social environment shaped by the law, but in Jude's catastrophic failure to recognize the sign-based constructedness of personal identity as well as of culture and society. One could even go so far as to read the novel in a positive light, since Jude's failure is an important example of how *not* to construct one's identity and since other characters, who are in a way less 'monumental,' inflexible or petrified than Jude the 'stonemason' – I need only refer to Vilbert and Arabella – demonstrate that survival and even a limited degree of happiness are possible. Maybe Jude's failure can even be regarded as proof not only of the freedom of the individual but also of the necessity to comprehend the constructedness of society and culture in general and of sexual identity in particular.

Narrativity, or: Master narratives of masculinity

If we consider the question of who Jude Fawley really is, we have to realize that at the outset of the novel he is a little boy whose mother committed suicide and whose father is dead too. As an orphan, Jude wishes not to have been born at all, feels isolated and is brought up unloved by his aunt: "It would ha' been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi' thy mother and father, poor useless boy!" (J, p. 13). Shortly after this scene, Jude's male idol and substitute father figure, Phillotson, the schoolmaster, leaves him in order to study in Christminster. Jude remains behind as a little boy, "who could not himself bear to hurt anything" (J, p. 17) and who "was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again" (J, p. 17). Given these facts, it is hardly surprising that Jude does not want to engage with life and sexuality: "If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man" (J, p. 18).

However, Jude does not remain passive but very soon follows well-established models regarding the construction of identity. Although Hardy's protagonist comes from an impoverished social background, there is never the question of Jude becoming 'merely' a butcher, a baker or a farmer. Instead, Jude emulates Phillotson⁵ and sets out to become a scholar. What is significant is that throughout Hardy's novel, Jude does not only try to enact or perform certain 'narrations of masculinity' but that these fail one after the other. Jude cast as the 'young lover' and later as the 'honest and knightly husband' of Arabella is first tricked into marriage and then left behind when Arabella decides to emigrate to Australia. Although Jude really labors to learn Greek and Latin, he never enters Christminster University – and the story of 'Jude the scholar' is one of failure, too. Underlying Jude's desire to quit his social sphere is the dream of 'Jude the self-made man.' When he sets out to follow Phillotson to Christminster, he walks "the remaining four miles rather from choice than from necessity, having always fancied himself arriving thus [...]. He went along the outlying streets with the cautious tread of an explorer" (J, p. 77f.). After his project to enter Christminster as a 'self-made man' has failed, Jude embraces a further prototypically masculine discourse by praising the dignity of manual labor: "[The] stone yard was a center of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of

scholarly study within the noblest of colleges" (J, p. 85). That this discourse, which finds its incarnation in Tetuphenay, the head of Biblioll college, who advises Jude to remain in his sphere and to stick to his trade⁶, glorifies manual labor only to keep up a rigid class system, is of course not realized by Jude who, somewhat naively, believes in the truth of the spoken or written word: "He had known all that before. He knew it was true" (J, p. 117). Eventually, Jude's contact with Sue and their ensuing relationship triggers off a whole series of different concepts of masculine identity: 'Jude the would-be lover of Sue,' 'Jude and the ideal of a devotional life in Melchester,' 'Jude the would-be husband of Sue and successful baker of Christminster cakes,' 'Jude the failed husband of Sue and would-be intellectual' (the 'Christminster dream' again) and, last but not least, 'Jude the disillusioned knightly and honor-bound husband of Arabella': "'Don't say anything against my honor!' enjoined Jude hotly, standing up. 'I'd marry the W---- of Babylon rather than do anything dishonorable! [...] I am not a man who wants to save himself at the expense of the weaker among us!'" (J, p. 381f.).

In this context, Elizabeth Langland (1993) correctly speaks of "Jude's alternating evasion and pursuit of manhood" (p. 42) and stresses the importance of "social practices and discourses that mock the idea of individual self-determination and locate self-fulfillment in death" (p. 46). If it is a point of controversy whether Hardy's novel actually endorses death as a solution, this ambiguity does certainly not apply to the reasons for Jude's problems. If Jude accepts narrative myths of traditional manliness as truths and wholly identifies with them, he falls prey to Lacanian *méconnaissance* (Lacan, 1977a) without ever understanding what he is actually doing or what is happening to him. Even when he realizes that the myths he tries to live by do not work, he shies away from facing the consequences so that finally Jude, the would-be scholar, refuses to learn and self-destructively, albeit unconsciously, propels himself from one *méconnaissance* into another: "It was better to love a woman than to be a graduate, or a parson; ay, or a pope!" (J, p. 48). But no matter with which "of several versions of the book of life typically invoked by Victorian fiction" (Dolin, 2000, p. 214) Jude identifies, he is bound to fail, since, like its protagonist, the logic inherent in Hardy's novel

invokes and finds untenable precisely those narratives which seek to reproduce most closely the shape of human existence: the spiritual journey; the story of individual vocation and education; the marriage plot. Its organization into curiously self-contained parts, a sort of episodic form writ large, follows the arrangement of Jude's life into distinct phases, each of which is overseen by an informing myth or masterplot. (Dolin, 2000, p. 214f.)

From this it follows that both on the level of the individual, i.e. with regard to the narrative models of self-made man, family man or explorer, and on the level of the literary text, the narrative trajectory of the novel of development or *Bildungsroman* is being questioned. If novels of development are "stories of a boy's initiation into

manhood, and [...] rituals of masculine identity" (Dolin, 2000, p. 215) and if masculinity is established by the fact that the protagonist, after a period of learning, proves his identity through his knowledge and education, his material wealth, his integration into society and his newly founded family, then the trajectory of *Jude the Obscure* is the exact opposite. However, given the death of its protagonist, *Jude the Obscure* is not a negative *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of D. H. Lawrence either (Horlacher, 2006). With Tim Dolin, one could ask whether Hardy's novel does not serve as a deconstructive foil, foregrounding the implicit, unavowedly conservative ideological subtext of the English *Bildungsroman*⁷. Or, even more radically, one could read *Jude the Obscure* as a "blueprint for the creation of self-destructive individuals" (Guetzloe & Cline, 1989, p. 124f.), which would then demonstrate that the socially propagated 'master narratives of masculinity' are hardly more than a deception serving to secure social structures that guarantee class immobility and the persistence of the law.

The letter and the law

If one conceives of the notion of law in accordance with Lacan to be in the general sense a symbolic order or structure which coincides with language and determines the rules of society,⁸ one can argue that it is

the world of words that creates the world of things [...]. Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man. [...]. Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood'; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its meaning in the last judgment, where the Word absolves his being or condemns it – unless he attain the subjective bringing to realization of being-for-death. (Lacan, 1977a, pp. 65, 68)

In other words, if the human being is the product of the sign, and if culture is the product of the symbolic order, then the question arises whether Jude's project of constructing a successful male identity does not fail because of his deficient understanding of how language and therefore society and the law work on a formal basis.⁹ One could even say that, anticipating Ferdinand de Saussure, Hardy's novel demonstrates that language – and even identity – is form and not substance. From this, two concomitant questions arise, namely how the law is presented in *Jude the Obscure* and how one should deal with it.

Though Jude's problems arise from his misunderstanding of different 'master narratives of masculinity' and though Jude repeatedly blames society and the

'marriage law' for his unhappiness, a closer look at the novel reveals that he is *not* presented as the victim of the semantic contents of the law. Despite Jude and Sue being afraid of the law, the law does not seem to care about them. As a matter of fact, no official institution ever expresses an interest in whether Jude is divorced from Arabella or not, or indeed takes any interest in whether Jude and Sue are married or not. In addition to this, Jude's divorce from Arabella and Sue's divorce from Phillotson are easily obtained and don't attract any attention at all:

The proceedings in the Law-Courts had reached their consciousness but as a distant sound, and an occasional missive which they hardly understood. [...] The same concluding incident in Jude's suit against Arabella had occurred about a month or two earlier. Both cases had been too insignificant to be reported in the papers, further than by name in a long list of other undefended cases. [...] "One thing is certain, that however the decree may be brought about, a marriage is dissolved when it is dissolved. There is this advantage in being poor obscure people like us – that these things are done for us in a rough and ready fashion. It was the same with me and Arabella. I was afraid her criminal second marriage would have been discovered, and she punished; but nobody took any interest in her – nobody inquired, nobody suspected it." (J, p. 258f.)¹⁰

If the 'semantic side' or meaning (the signified) of the law does not harm Jude and Sue, this does, however, not hold true for the 'formal side' of the law considered as a chain of signifiers. As has been shown, Hardy's novel consistently devalues the semantic side or structure of the law in order to stress its formal nature as an empty chain of signifiers. Moreover, Hardy's novel argues in favor of the ability to recognize and make use of interstices and soft spaces as a creative room for action. How this is enacted on the level of the *histoire* can, amongst other things, be shown with the help of writing, for example personal letters, as well as with the help of Arabella and her later lover Vilbert.

If we take a close look at the large number of letters in Hardy's novel, we have to realize that these letters construe multiple realities which have little to do with the reality actually experienced by the characters. In Hardy's own words: "nothing *is as it appears*." When Sue writes "a passionate letter [...]. She was quite lonely and miserable, she told him," Jude later realizes that she was not "quite the woman who had written the letter that summoned him" (J, p. 132). Thus a disappointed Jude tells Sue: "You are not so nice in presence as you are in your letters" (J, p. 165). But Jude never inquires further and never understands that basically he is "trapped within a linguistic worldview which holds that truth is external, is universally applicable, and has already been uttered" (Weinstein, 1984, p. 133). This is not only demonstrated by the often hapless interaction between Jude and Sue but is even made clear by the narrator, who stresses that "Jude was in danger of attaching more meaning to Sue's impulsive note than it really was intended to bear" (J, p. 156). Unfortunately, Jude is at no point able to transcend his

naïve belief in the presence of truth, in the presence of the signified, in the contents of the law. And at no point is he able to gain insight into the functional mechanisms of this law. Although Jude realizes that Arabella has tricked him into marriage and that he does not love her, he never considers a divorce, "the law being the law" (J, p. 182). Phillotson even equates the law with cruelty and refuses "to be cruel to her [Sue] in the name of the law" (J, p. 235). But as has already been demonstrated, the law is totally indifferent towards Jude and Sue. Thus what causes their misery is not the law in itself, but a misunderstanding of it – and maybe one reason why the law gains such importance in *Jude the Obscure* is the sadomasochistic tendency in both, i.e. Sue and Jude's willingness to submit to any kind of authority. Maybe happiness and freedom are not even wished for! Sue, at least, seeks humiliation and penance when she returns to Phillotson in order to be sexually abused. And it was Sue, too, who started the relationship with a compliant Jude in "the selfish and cruel wish to make your heart ache for me without letting mine ache for you" (J, p. 353).

If there is one character in *Jude the Obscure* who has a reason to fear the law, it is certainly Arabella. In the first place she does not tell her second husband about her son, and then she commits adultery with Jude – if indeed it can be called adultery at all, since at that point in time, Arabella is bigamously married to Cartlett as well as to Jude. If she has a cool and relaxed way of interpreting the law – "Crime! Pooh. They don't think much of such as that over there! Lots of 'em do it..." (J, p. 185) – she nevertheless gets away with it. Arabella, the unfaithful bigamist, neither fears nor openly opposes the law. Most of the time, she just ignores it or 'uses' it and even goes so far as to accuse the law abiding Jude of not respecting the institution of marriage: "You've no respect for marriage whatever, or its rights and duties!" (J, p. 385). Later, Arabella even expressly endorses the law and gives Sue the advice to marry Jude as soon as possible:

Then let him [take you before the parson], in Heaven's name. Life with a man is more businesslike after it, and money matters work better. And then, you see, if you have rows, and he turns you out of doors, you can get the law to protect you, which you can't otherwise. (J, p. 270)

Although their actions are morally questionable, Arabella and Vilbert, the itinerant quack-doctor, do know how to deal with the law and how to survive. Vilbert, who calls himself "a public benefactor" (J, p. 26), is "well known to the rustic population, and absolutely unknown to anybody else, as he, indeed, took care to be, to avoid inconvenient investigations" (J, p. 26). He is always one step ahead of the law and sells "golden ointment, life-drops, and female pills" (J, p. 27).¹¹ Traversing enormous distances on foot and being constantly in motion, he, like no other character, symbolizes the deferral of meaning along the chain of signifiers. Whereas Arabella lives her passions and does not care much about justice, and whereas Vilbert gets away with selling perfectly useless pills allegedly "warranted efficacious by the *Government stamp*" (J, p. 294, my emphasis), Sue and Jude manage to adopt a

similar lifestyle only for a very short period of time. They take advantage of Jude's "adaptive craftsmanship to enter on a shifting, almost nomadic, life, which was not without its pleasantness" (J, p. 309). Or, to quote Sue: "We gave up all ambition, and were never so happy in our lives" (J, p. 313). But this nomadic lifestyle, which coincides with the only true happiness the couple ever experiences, remains an exception. Instead of analyzing the reason for their happiness, instead of actively inquiring into the mechanisms of the law, and instead of engaging with life, Jude and Sue remain in a state of limbo. They speak of their often body- and sexless love as "something too sublime for earth," and not only is Jude himself primarily interested in Greek and Latin, two so-called dead languages, but he is also fascinated by Christminster's emblematic voices of dead philosophers:

Knowing not a human being here, Jude began to be impressed with the isolation of his own personality, as with a self-specter, the sensation being that of one who walked but could not make himself seen or heard. He drew his breath pensively, and, seeming thus almost his own ghost, gave his thoughts to the other ghostly presences with which the nooks were haunted. (J, p. 79)

The "order-loving man" and his refusal of responsibility

In Hardy's novel, language, if incorrectly understood, seems to harbor a lethal quality. This becomes obvious when Jude's son Little Father Time takes the "learned doctors," "solemn stately figures in blood-red robes," to announce "Judgment Day" (J, p. 324) – and when, shortly after this, he takes Sue by her word, i.e. understands her literally and commits murder and suicide: "I said the world was against us, that it was better to be out of life than in it at this price; and he took it literally" (J, p. 338). On different occasions, Little Father Time is not only described as mechanical and impersonal but also equated with his father so that Jeffrey Berman calls him a "younger and more extreme portrait of Jude" (Berman, 1989, p. 157). If Little Father Time's understanding of language is defective and causes his death and the demise of his siblings, it is no surprise that Jude faces a similar fate. As we know, Jude believes in the existence of a universal law of transmutation which would not only allow one language to be translated mechanically into another but would also equate natural with civil law.¹² Jude assumes "that the words of the required language were always to be found somewhere latent in the words of the given language by those who had the art to uncover them" (J, p. 30). And indeed, Hardy's protagonist is continuously looking for meaning: "The mountain-weight of material under which the ideas lay in those dusty volumes called the classics piqued him into a dogged, mouselike subtlety of attempt to move it piecemeal" (J, p. 31). If Marcel Proust's protagonist in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* searches for hidden meanings in family names "in order to suggest their motivation and to gratify the obsession 'to discover some subject to which I could impart a philosophical significance of infinite value'" (Horlacher, 2002), Jude does not behave differently: "It had been the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to, for some place

which he could call admirable. Should he find that place in this city if he could get there?" (J, p. 25). Throughout his life Jude keeps looking for deep structures and for a law of transmutation which would help him to understand the world, its rules and languages as well as Sue's "liquid" and – significantly – "untranslatable eyes" (J, p. 89). These untranslatable eyes – just as the dead languages – serve as metaphors for the fact that Jude's readings are severe misreadings, that they do not produce knowledge about an exterior world but are much better understood as projections driven by lack and desire.¹³ And indeed, Jude recognizes neither Phillotson nor Arabella for what they are. In addition to this, he sticks to his construction of an ideal image of Christminster as "a city of light" (J, p. 25) till the end, although the narrator tells us of "doorways of enriched and florid middle-age design, their extinct air being accentuated by the rottenness of the stones" (J, p. 79), and expressly concludes that "[i]t seemed impossible that modern thought could house itself in such decrepit and superseded chambers" (J, p. 79).

Although "hardly a shred of the beliefs with which he had first gone up to Christminster [was] now remaining with him" (J, p. 310), and although he "was mentally approaching the position which Sue had occupied when he first met her" (J, p. 309f.), the death of his children and the fact that Sue leaves him make it impossible for Jude to live with the unbearable "sense of inconsistency between his former dogmas and his present practice" (J, p. 309f.). This keenly felt sense of difference and the absence of a supportive and freethinking Sue accelerate the loss of his flexibility and his final entry into the realm of the material, his petrification so to speak, and his death. On the one hand, Jude's ability to construct his sexual identity is much more flexible and progressive than any essentialist construction would allow for – just compare him to the hopelessly phallic and failing Michael Henchard –, on the other hand, Jude's construction of masculinity is, as has already been shown, repeatedly characterized by *méconnaissance*. Whether Jude constructs his male identity through identification with the 'master narratives of masculinity' or whether he identifies with Sue's demands (J, pp. 239; 241), in each and every case he takes something foreign or alien as his own. He identifies with external concepts, thereby eliminating the distancing of the symbolic and reverting to "Joseph the dreamer of dreams" (J, p. 205), in other words blithely embracing the imaginary. Only this identification seems to give him a kind of security, though it is a treacherous security that ultimately prevents him from understanding that his male identity is nothing but a shifting construct.

If Jude suspects that sexual identity has to be produced and performed again and again, he also senses that this kind of identity does not harbor the security he craves but counteracts his logocentric desire for a transcendental meaning which would end his lack of being once and for all. Therefore, he prefers a form of *méconnaissance*, an identification with a supposedly pre-given subject position – and it is exactly this stance which prevents him from learning and makes a second, albeit unwanted marriage with Arabella possible. If Jude fails, it is because he is unable to accept the primacy of the signifier and because he opts for his fantasies of

regression, i.e. a flight into the imaginary and a putative plenitude. This refusal of the multiple spaces which the symbolic order offers implies the refusal of responsibility and of a life which is not ruled by allegedly transcendental authorities. What Jude is looking for, is plenitude in the sense of a fusion of the signifier and the signified; what he craves is the end of lack and desire. That this wish ultimately coincides with the wish to die is made clear by Jude's suicidal tendency: If, already during his youth, Jude undertakes an unsuccessful attempt to kill himself (J, p. 70) and "wish[es] himself out of the world" (J, p. 31), this early affinity to the realm of death is affirmed throughout the novel if we take into account that the narrator stresses that Jude is "more ghostly, less substantial" than even the voices of the dead philosophers who haunt Christminster, that the city itself is characterized as "a place full of fetishists and ghost-seers" (J, p. 151), that Jude admits: "I am fearful of life, specter-seeing always" (J, p. 151), that the "expression of Jude's corpse-like face in the watery lamplight was indeed as if he saw people where there was nobody" (J, p. 392) and that he is metaphorically killed by the milestone in which, right at the beginning of his journey, he carved his hopeful "THITHER."

The lethal aspects of writing, or: In search of origin(s) and truth

Not without reason does Jude call himself a "monumental mason." He works on "the deadest and most intractable of materials" and sees himself "as in the business of supplying dead bodies, helping to provide 'the carcasses that contained the scholar souls'" (Garson, 2000, p. 183). As a journeyman carver of tombstone epitaphs, he is a representative of fixation and death – and significantly enough, it is this job which ruins his health.

I was never really stout enough for the stone trade, particularly the fixing. Moving the blocks always used to strain me, and standing the trying draughts in buildings before the windows are in, always gave me colds, and I think that began the mischief inside. (J, p. 398)

Jude develops pneumonia, but instead of clinging to Arabella, who at least stands for life, he embraces a sex- and bodiless Sue as well as his wishful projections of a Christminster in which he sees not only a mistress¹⁴ but also a clearly phallic "castle manned by scholarship and religion." As a stonemason, Jude has always shunned speech, has happily carved and chiseled away in his endeavor to fix linguistic signs in stone and – in analogy to this – to reach a position where his identity and his masculinity, both so heavily undermined by Sue and Arabella, would be fixed once and for all. Yet if chiseling epitaphs on tombstones promises to allow for a semblance of permanency and thereby the transcendence of time, it is still a form of writing and as such characterized not by the presence of any truth whatsoever but rather by absence and death.¹⁵ What Jude, the stonemason, does, is literally to petrify the signifiers in the vain hope that if only he could monumentalize and fix them once and for all, if only he could put an end to their play of deferral and unlimited semiosis, if only he could become part of the male scholarly society of Christminster, where he supposes a timeless, phallic truth to reign, and if only he

could end his nomadic life and unstable relationships, this would guarantee the presence of a pre-given sense in life and therefore eventually stabilize his identity. But instead of gaining access to a transcendental signified, he unknowingly turns himself into a 'fetishist of the signifier,' unreflectingly¹⁶ working with a medium of fixation and mortification which requires the transitory suspension of the process of dynamic development since only the complete emptying of the phenomenon, the sclerotic process of becoming a sign, the translation and transformation of plenitude into the obsession of writing can ever allow transferability (Horlacher, 2002, p. 7). But, one has to ask, transferability of what? At best of "untranslatable eyes" (J, p. 89) or of the dead languages Jude never really masters. Any attempt to reach a final, monosemic truth is revealed to be lethal: Little Father Time and his siblings die because Sue tries to speak 'the truth' – "It was that I wanted to be *truthful*. I couldn't bear deceiving him [...] and he *took it literally*" (J, p. 338; my italics) –, Phillotson, taking a masochistic, self-sacrificing and psychologically troubled Sue "*at her word*," knows all too well that there is much more than just "a touch of selfishness in it" (J, p. 365), and Jude, Little Father Time's double, finally dies because he has the same defective understanding of language and writing as his son. One last example should suffice to make this clear: What Jude feels during a moment of introspection at the beginning of his journey when he leaves Marygreen for Christminster is projected into his carving of the milestone and even rendered graphically in the novel (J, p. 73):

THITHER



J.F.

At the end of his search for truth, Jude returns to this milestone to rediscover its fundamental message. A message which – significantly enough – does not possess a fixed meaning or signified but as an indexical sign is in itself nothing if not the mere display of the principle of deferral which underlies language and guarantees its functioning. If, in the beginning, Jude's "THITHER" stands for his aims and hopes in life, if it stands for the supposed presence of truth in Christminster, it appears in the end as a self-effacing, ironic commentary, inscribed on a stone which Hardy's text directly links to the gallows and thus symbolically transforms into Jude's tombstone. If Jude's acts of "embodying an aim in a word, and cutting that word in stone," are emblematic of his logocentric desire, if he endeavors again and again "to make the word real – to ensure its fulfillment" (Saldívar, 1989; Garson, 2000) by monumentalizing the signifier, it is exactly the opposite which happens. There is not only no fixed meaning but the signifier, although made of stone, vanishes too. Jude's inscription is "nearly obliterated by moss" (J, p. 390) and its meaning has changed from a hopeful indication of Jude's aims to an ironic comment on the mechanism of language, on Jude's failure and on the novel itself. Or, as Jan B. Gordon states: "In a curious way, *Jude the Obscure* seems to disappear as a book really, leaving language, texts, and their related activities as a kind of graveyard" (Gordon, 1989, 74).

Where this "graveyard" and where Jude's defective understanding of language and writing come from and which semiotic doctrine Hardy's novel adamantly argues against becomes evident if one considers that Jude basically

follows in the footsteps of St. Paul and that he clings to his belief that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). What Jude is ultimately looking for and what he is trying to write or to chisel is this very epistle "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3; cf. Saldívar, 1989, p. 50). If Jude could find this writing in his heart, his identity and meaning in life would forever be fixed and any fetishizing of the signifier, any hammering and chiseling would become unnecessary. But the kind of writing Jude is looking for is hard to find indeed, given that it would have supernatural, magic powers (Goetsch, 1993, p. 303) since it would be exactly *that* kind of writing which is not subject to the very foundation and rules which make writing – as well as speaking – possible, namely absence, difference and deferral.¹⁷

That any kind of writing into the "fleshy tables" of the heart is characterized by several severe media-theoretical problems does not only become apparent if a) one considers Polycarp of Smyrna's "Wherefore, forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us *return to the word* which has been handed down to us *from the beginning*"¹⁸ which indirectly proves the very absence of exactly this *word*, but also if b) one takes into consideration Derrida's notion of *arche*-writing, c) the fact that the very idea of an *arche*-text/*Urtext* or *arche*-word/*Urwort* is most probably the metaleptical and retrospective effect of writing,¹⁹ and d) that neither oral nor literate cultures can allow for the existence of an *arche-logos*. As Albert B. Lord has argued, in a world that conceives of itself orally no originary or *arche*-word is possible, let alone secondary words derived therefrom. Instead, there would be a plurality of 'original words,' and precisely because of that no original word. If one were to take Lord's thesis seriously, which Bible exegeses has hardly done, it would indeed have a fateful effect upon the unending search for the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus, that is to say the *ipsissima structura* of his words (see Kelber, 1988, p. 37).²⁰

As Gordon has shown, Jude, "the dreamer of dreams," lives in a world in which "Origins are infinitely desired and therefore absent," so that "some kind of translation becomes necessary (because of the slipping of the Original) and impossible, because a sacred text [...] would be untranslatable" (Gordon, 1989, p. 74). Therefore, this "sacred text" or presence of meaning is clearly denounced as a figment of Jude's imagination: Sue's eyes remain for ever unfathomable and untranslatable and her character incomprehensible to him, and his revered "city of light" (J, p. 25) and worshipped "new Jerusalem" (J, p. 22) is tellingly enough not characterized by authenticity but by "copying, patching, and imitating" (J, p. 85). Christminster and its cathedral are mainly marked by the fact that "numerous blocks of stone were lying about, which signified that the cathedral was undergoing restoration or repair to a considerable extent" (J, p. 131). Indeed, "the Cathedral repairs [...] were very extensive, the whole fittings having been swept away, to be replaced by new" (J, p. 135).²¹ Ironically, as a stonemason Jude himself is a chief agent of this "copying, patching, and imitating", and the stone yard where he works is one of the most important places "where de-centering, the propagation of an historical supplement within a myth of restoration, is maintained for profit. It is a graveyard in some double sense, since the 'copy' speaks also to the death of any medieval scholasticism that could be recovered" (Gordon, 1989, p. 57). But with

Hardy, even this possibility of recoverability is negated, since "[t]here is no *natural* truth written anywhere that might be read", since "[e]verything in Wessex 'begins' with repetition, with secondary images of a meaning that was never present but whose *signified* presence is reconstituted by the supplementary and belated word of Jude's desires" (Saldívar, 2000, p. 43).

As a final look at Jude's beloved books reveals, these don't contain any original meaning either but are "amended by numerous correctors, and with *variorum* readings in the margin" (J, p. 43). Thus "in a world where all knowledge is emendation and revision rather than recovery" (Gordon, 1989, p. 50), texts, be they supposedly holy or not, are generally revealed to be palimpsests. But if meaning becomes a "function of progressive erasure," if the word 'Bible' comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, i.e. "the books" (Alter & Kermode, 1987, p. 11), if the Holy Text is not only from Sue Bridehead's deconstructive editorial perspective²² revealed to be "the reproduction of an arbitrary totalisation – the collection" (Gordon, 1989, p. 50) and turned into a conglomeration of episodes, thus reflecting the narrative structure of *Jude the Obscure*, this implies that Hardy equates his novel with the Bible and – in analogy to D. H. Lawrence in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* – denounces the holy scripture as a fictional text, i.e. literature. Moreover, the novel not only becomes the equivalent of Sue's edited version of the *New Testament*, it also coincides with Hardy's 'master narratives of masculinity' and Jude's different versions of his own male identity which both are revealed to be of an episodic nature. If, in addition to that, we also take Jude's homoerotic attachment to Phillotson, Arabella's earthy and earthly sexuality, Vilbert's emblematic function as Jude's successor, Sue's depiction as "sexless" and "boyish" and – finally – Jude's female attributes into consideration, it becomes clear that Hardy's novel vehemently a) questions the notion of a 'natural' masculinity or femininity, b) emphasizes the constructedness, alterability and even multiplicity of sexual identities, and c) calls upon the reader not to look for an original meaning but to engage critically with the text, with one's life, with one's identity. But if, as has been argued, it is in the gap between the potential capacities of a differential code and any particular specification of it that the arena of subjectivity and freedom lies, if one's identity is "'above all, an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act,' the 'very expression' of responsibility, not something independent of it" (Ermarth, 2000), if therefore a discursive universe does not bereave us of personal responsibility and agency, this then is exactly what Jude, the "order-loving man," who takes "so much tradition on trust" (J, p. 153), is not prepared to accept: "My dear one [...] your will is law to me" (J, p. 239). In other words: "There were no brains in his head equal to this business; [...] he wished he had never seen a book, that he might never see another, that he had never been born" (J, p. 31).

The blessings of allegory

Instead of offering a transcendental truth, "the direct, epileptic Word," the "cry that might abolish the night" (Thomas Pynchon) or an 'authentic' and unshakeable male identity, Hardy's novel offers only formal and dynamic 'truths.' It does not posit a

simple negation of understanding but – in an almost postmodern turn – simply insists on the unverifiability of meaning and – equating Jude with Little Father Time – vehemently asks for an allegorical reading. As has been shown, taking words literally inevitably entails death. Thus, what Hardy's novel, albeit *ad negativum*, asks for is a metaphorical, even an allegorical reading and understanding of textuality, as has been suggested by Paul de Man. If the character of Little Father Time has often been criticized as being deficient from the perspective of a traditional realist aesthetics, Jude's son becomes explicable if the episode involving his death is read as an allegory: What happens to Little Father Time also happens to Jude and – in a metaphorical sense – even to Hardy's novel, which the latter repeatedly claimed to have been largely misunderstood by the public. Hardy's complaint, however, should not be understood as the implicit postulation of the existence of the one and only 'right' interpretation or of a stable, single and unitary meaning. Basically, the kind of reader Hardy attacks is his own protagonist, is Jude Fawley, i.e. a reader who ignores the figurative and allegorical dimension of writing, who looks for an "anchoring point" and the presence of sense in a *literal meaning* and who, just like Little Father Time, naively and anxiously "follow[s] his directions literally, without an inquiring gaze at anything" (J, p. 278). What Hardy asks for is an understanding of the figurative dimension of language, which on a metalevel shows that any final understanding is impossible. In doing so, neither he nor the novel contradict themselves since the reader experiences together with Jude

that language itself, to the extent that it attempts to be truthful, necessarily misleads us about its own ability to take us outside its own structures in search of meaning [...]. [A]s an allegory of the breakdown of the referential system, *Jude the Obscure* continues to refer to its own chiasmic operations. This new referentiality is one bounded strictly by the margins of textuality (Saldívar, 2000, pp. 44; 47)

...and finally leads to the fact "that the resulting sociological, ethical, legal, or thematic categories" produced by the text "are undone by the very process that creates them" (Saldívar, 2000, p. 47). If Hardy's novel questions "the assurance of the truth of the referent," if there is simply nothing outside the symbolic order and the discursive universe of language which can fulfill the function of an unquestionable anchoring point, then the only 'safe' reference possible is, of course, a linguistic reference. That this reference is not unproblematic in itself becomes obvious if one considers that the novel also demonstrates that a one-sided, fixed and inflexible assignment of signifieds to signifiers – and this also holds true for the construction of sexual identity – is lethal and has to give way to the infinite chain of semiosis, i.e. to the potentially never-ending interpretation of signs through other signs. Thus, with regard to its meaning, Hardy's novel must be seen as an in principle unlimited play of signification, which, contrary to all attempts at controlling meaning through logic and clarification, ultimately leads to indeterminacy and indecision – and it is exactly by these very means that the text gains in fascination, depth and open-endedness. From this it follows that *Jude the Obscure* is not, as literary critics have often argued, a realist novel about the *New Woman* in the form of Sue

Bridehead but an allegory of patriarchal laws, symbolic systems and the illusion of a metaphysics of presence. For Hardy's novel, meaning is always produced, dynamic, unstable and contextual, meaning – just as one's identity – cannot be found or fixed but has to be constructed.

We can conclude that if Jude fails in the construction of his male identity and of a happy and meaningful existence, he mainly does so because he stubbornly continues to believe in the presence of a pre-given, and stable "truth" which can be located or discovered; if Jude fails, he does so because he ignores the fact that (sexual) identity is not a biological given but to a large extent the product of a metaphorical act of writing which retrospectively creates the subject's supposed unity, namely the illusion of an essence, an origin or a presence which does not exist outside language but must be regarded as its very product. This does not mean, however, that on a philosophical level Hardy's novel leaves us with a bleak and simple negative 'truth.' Jude's failure neither suggests nor implies that Hardy's novel denies the possibility of a meaningful existence. Quite the contrary: In an existential and linguistic turn, *Jude the Obscure* vividly and dramatically illustrates that *l'existence précède l'essence* (Jean-Paul Sartre), that it is absence which founds the symbolic order as well as the *conditio humana* and that it is exactly this lack which ultimately guarantees our freedom (Lang, 1998). If Hardy's narrator explicitly states that "nobody did come, because nobody does" (J, p. 31), this implies that individuals as 'subjects-in-process' (Kristeva; Ermarth, 2000) have to create – or better: are allowed to create their own identity and meaning in life, that this work of construction is never finished and that – in contrast to Jude's hopes and wishes but in analogy to Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* – the price for this freedom resides in the fact that we cannot return to any kind of internal, 'essential' or 'natural' truth at the core of the subject.

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Notes

¹ Thomas Hardy: *Jude the Obscure*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Dennis Taylor, Penguin Classics, London 1998 [1895]. All further references are to this edition and are abbreviated as J plus page number. This article is a thoroughly revised and enlarged version of Horlacher (2005).

² See also: "Life is a something foreign to the classificatory demands made by the spirit. In its utterances, its values, and even its bodily grounding, life is a phenomenon of stain, illogic (*sic*), and obscurity" (Weinstein, 1984, p. 139).

³ See Horlacher (2004); Kroll (2002, p. 213); Christiansen (1995, p. 15); Mertens (1997, p. 45); Connell (1995, pp. 21f., 46f).

⁴ See Broich (1983, p. 221); Mühlheim (1983, p. 188); Gelfert (1995, p. 74); Watts (1992, p. 80).

⁵ For reasons of space I can only allude to the erotic component inherent in Jude's relation to Phillotson.

⁶ "BIBLIOLL COLLEGE. 'SIR, – I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. Yours faithfully, T. TETUPHENAY. 'To Mr. J. FAWLEY, Stone-cutter.'" (J, p. 117).

⁷ "[They] need only to prove the self that they have always shared with the dominant class to which they belong, and it is duly restored to them as their rightful inheritance." In other words: "When David Copperfield speculates whether he will turn out to be the hero of his own life, he is questioning whether he can prove himself to be what he indubitably already is" (Dolin, 2000, p. 215).

⁸ *Ordre symbolique, ordre du langage* and *ordre de la loi* coincide. See Lang (1998, pp. 155, 206, 236f., 264); Horlacher (2006, pp. 264-269).

⁹ For a discussion of the relative (but often ignored) freedom which Lacanian psychoanalysis allows the subject see Lang (1998, p. xii).

¹⁰ Marjorie Garson (2000) argues that *Jude the Obscure* is "not a very good analysis of the divorce issue, if only because the divorces it depicts are so readily obtained" (p. 186); see also Ingham (1976, p. 164).

¹¹ "Jude had one day seen him selling a pot of coloured lard to an old woman as a certain cure for a bad leg, the woman arranging to pay a guinea, in instalments of a shilling a fortnight, for the precious salve, which, according to the physician, could only be obtained from a particular animal which grazed on Mount Sinai, and was to be captured only at great risk to life and limb" (J, p. 26).

¹² For a critical discussion of the relation between 'civil law,' 'natural law' and allegory see Horlacher (2006, pp. 324-337).

¹³ "There is no *natural* truth written anywhere that might be read without being somehow altered in the process. The text of associations Jude fabricates around him is already woven of interpretations and differences in which the meaning of dreams and the desire for illusions are unnaturally coupled" (Saldívar, 2000, p. 43).

¹⁴ "He was getting so romantically attached to Christminster that, like a young lover alluding to his mistress, he felt bashful at mentioning its name again" (J, p. 24).

¹⁵ "[The] symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire. The first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestigial traces is the sepulture, and the intermediary of death can be recognized in every relation in which man comes to the life of his history" (Lacan, 1977b, p. 104).

¹⁶ "Hardy dramatizes characters whose consciousness of what they want and why they want it remains continuously out of phase with the vagaries of their incarnate behavior. They have no terms for finding out what they are actually doing, and no way of actually doing what they want" (Weinstein, 1984, p. 138).

¹⁷ See Derrida's notions of *archi-écriture/arche-writing*, *différance* and *dissémination*.

¹⁸ *Epistle to the Philippians*, my italics; see also Kelber (1988, p. 32).

¹⁹ Kelber (1988, p. 37); see also *ibid.*, where he argues that because the visual objectification of words that takes place in the act of writing enables for the first time at all a distinction to be made between the original (*Urschrift*) and the copy (*Abschrift*), one can view the reduction of words to the original or *arche-word* as having been inspired by the shift towards written forms.

²⁰ On the level of philosophy, Lord's thesis takes on significance with regard to Derrida's critique of the traditional dichotomy between speech and writing and the longing contained therein for the pure, logocentric origin. Speech, which in the Western tradition (according to Derrida) has become a symbol of our dreams of an eternal truth and a fundamental unity, is in Lord's view devoid of an *arche*-Logos. In the beginning was not the word, in the beginning *were words!* See Kelber (1988, p. 37).

²¹ See also: "In his bewilderment Phillotson entered the adjacent cathedral, just now in a direly dismantled state by reason of the repairs" (J, p. 162).

²² "'Jude,' she said brightly [...], 'will you let me make you a *new* New Testament, like the one I made for myself at Christminster?' 'Oh yes. How was that made?' 'I altered my old one by cutting up all the Epistles and Gospels into separate *brochures*, and rearranging them in chronological order as written, beginning the book with Thesalonians, following on with the Epistles, and putting the Gospels much further on. Then I had the volume rebound. My university friend (...) said it was an excellent idea. I know that reading it afterwards made it twice as interesting as before, and twice as understandable'" (J, p. 152).

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