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Highways and Cornfields: Space and Time in the Narration of Jude the Obscure

by JANET H. FREEMAN

A small slow voice rose from the shade of the fireside, as if out of the earth: “If I was you, mother, I wouldn’t marry father!” It came from little Time, and they started, for they had forgotten him.

(V. 4. 223)

Motion is like breathing in Jude the Obscure: it is both a sign of life and a sign of what life is like. As long as he lives, Jude Fawley never stops moving from place to place, sometimes deliberately, as when—“having always fancied himself arriving thus”—he gets out of the cart and makes his first entrance into Christminster walking on his own two feet; sometimes unconsciously, as when he and Arabella walk very far from home on their first afternoon together; or impulsively, as when he and Sue, having just met, walk out to Lumsdon in search of Phillotson. Sometimes Jude moves repeatedly, as when delivering Aunt Drusilla’s bread three times a week; and sometimes once and for all, as when Jude leaves Marygreen for what he rightly knows is the last time in his life and slowly heads back to Christminster—a journey completed in stages, as Jude’s ability to keep moving gradually lessens. Retracing steps he has taken many times before, Jude walks all the way to Alfredston. From there, he travels by a steam tram car and then by two branches of railway. Arabella is waiting for him at the station, and they walk home together in the dark, to “lodgings… nearer to the centre of the city” (VI,8,305) than the pork and sausage shop where their reunion had taken place a few months before. Sue had once called the train station “the centre of town life” (III,1,108), but Jude’s last journey is toward a different centrality. He has only one more move to make, to rooms in “a yet more central part of the town” (V,10,316); and then the bed he is to die in is close enough. On it, too weak even to get himself a drink of water, Jude at last lies motionless: but he has come in time. He is within earshot of the hurrahs of the annual Remembrance Day crowds. This proximity is, in the end, sufficient. Jude, hearing those words, knows what they mean.

This essay is an attempt to match that knowledge, that final congruence of place, time, and the hurrahs that signify them. I will follow Jude from place to place, attempting a definition of the space he traverses as well as his particular

1. II,1,63. All quotations from Jude the Obscure are taken from the W. W. Norton edition, ed. Norman Page (New York. 1978). I will cite part, chapter, and page.

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relation to it. I will describe the spatial configurations of time, recorded on the ground of Wessex and also in Jude’s experience. Finally, I will attempt to show how space and time in Jude the Obscure are related to the words of the text itself, the words through which these concepts are expressed. These three intentions can be stated separately; but space, time, and narrativity in Jude the Obscure are really one. I hope that what follows is true to that unity.

Jude the Obscure is an intensely single-minded book, and so is this essay. Rigidly earth-bound, time-bound, and word-bound, Jude the Obscure takes Thomas Hardy as well as Jude Fawley to the end of the line. All realist fiction takes careful note of space and time; but to my mind the sheer, not to say obsessive, density of Hardy’s notations in Jude the Obscure serves a further purpose, something beyond mere information. I attempt to recapture that density in this essay, assembling and regrouping many textual details in the process in order to expose Hardy’s purpose. Reality in Jude the Obscure seems to me to depend on one premise: that the words for space and time are the words for reality. All the rest, without exception, follows. This essay is an exposition of that inherency.

That Jude did not stay put, humbly practicing his craft on the stones and buildings of Marygreen—his first recorded labor, performed with a “keen new chisel” (I, 11, 61), was on such a stone—widensthe setting of Jude’s life story and stretches it across Middle and North Wessex all the way to the other side of the border. This expanse is Jude’s territory, his space. His itinerary is followed by Thomas Hardy in exquisite detail (Jude’s last journey from Marygreen, for instance, ends “after much waiting at a juncture” at precisely ten o’clock [VI, 8, 310]). It is intricate, repetitive, and uneven. It crisscrosses the Wessex landscape like pencilled lines drawn by someone intent on covering the paper. It turns that landscape into something to be got over, a blank page, an impediment.

Readers of Jude the Obscure have taken note of this resistance, generally with a feeling of loss. Even in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, that other story of an obscure young villager who does not stay home, the landscape is expressive of Tess’s conscious life, not an obstacle to it. It would never be said of the Wessex in which Tess lived out her life that “the imagination hates its concave, loamy cornfields and dreary, hedgeless highways,” but it was said—in an 1896 review—of the landscape of Jude the Obscure. Since then, opinion has changed very little. It was said, in 1953, that in Jude the Obscure there is “no background at all . . . of a harmonious common life in accord with . . . nature.” Later critics have observed “the disappearance of human meaning from the landscape of the

2. See David Sonstroem, “Order and Disorder in Jude the Obscure,” English Literature in Transition, 24 (1981), 9, who calls Jude’s path “extraordinarily elaborate and ungainly” and provides a detailed map of it. See also the map of Hardy’s Wessex in Dyens Kay-Robinson, Hardy’s Wessex Reappraised (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971).

3. Lawrence Lerner and John Holmstrom, eds., Thomas Hardy and His Readers (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p. 118. The reviewer quoted here (and referred to later in this essay) was Edmund Gosse, writing in the January 1896 issue of Cosmopolis.

Jude, aged nineteen, Resistance and Mocking Moral Growth. We want our novelist back among the rich orchards of the Hintocks,” wrote that early reviewer, not realizing that the loss of Jude’s most distant ancestors and his own children is burying Jude away. And Jude pays a very high price when he fails to see it in front of his eyes. Walking home from Alfredston to Marygreen, for example, his tools on his back and his mind full of dreams of Christminster, Jude, aged nineteen, slows his pace, forgets where he is going, and stands “quite still, looking at the ground as though the future were thrown thereon by a magic lantern” (1,6,33). What gets thrown, in fact, and at that exact moment, smacking Jude on the ear and falling to the ground at his feet, is the pig’s pizzle, the sign of Jude’s unnamed, undreamt-of future. Hardy remarks without comment that Jude can “tell at a glance” what it is, even before he lays down his tools, picks it up, and holds it in his hands.

Jude himself is “held to the spot” (35) by an earthiness he does not yet recognize, though a few days later, once again slowing to a stop and looking at the ground, he sees its emblem. This time Jude looks very closely and can “just discern in the damp dust” his and Arabella’s footprints, made when “they had stood locked in each other’s arms” (1,7,42). Those “imprints,” as Hardy calls them, are the record of Jude’s experience. He is reading his own history written on the ground, the history of his coming down to earth. Eventually Arabella pulls Jude to the ground beside her. They lie down together, Arabella holding on to Jude’s hand as she gazes up into “blue miles of sky,” the two of them are the record of Jude’s life. In it Jude’s restlessness is recorded and memorialized. From it come the stones Jude works on all his life. And Jude pays a very high price when he fails to see it in front of his eyes. Walking home from Alfredston to Marygreen, for example, his tools on his back and his mind full of dreams of Christminster, Jude, aged nineteen, slows his pace, forgets where he is going, and stands “quite still, looking at the ground as though the future were thrown thereon by a magic lantern” (1,6,33). What gets thrown, in fact, and at that exact moment, smacking Jude on the ear and falling to the ground at his feet, is the pig’s pizzle, the sign of Jude’s unnamed, undreamt-of future. Hardy remarks without comment that Jude can “tell at a glance” what it is, even before he lays down his tools, picks it up, and holds it in his hands.

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Jude’s complex relation to the ground he walks on is established by these incidents. The more he moves, the more significant the ground on which his movements are traced becomes. It is the material of his history, at once his space and his time, without which his history could not be told. Hardy’s storytelling, like Jude’s footprints in the dust or the letters Jude carves in stone, repeats and reinforces this definition. He partitions Jude the Obscure according to locations—“At Marygreen,” “At Christminster,” and so forth, as if he were pinning something down. He describes Marygreen itself after Phillotson leaves it behind, as if to point out its endurance. He tells about picturesque Shaston and Stoke-Barehills, communities Jude and Sue pass through but scarcely notice, like a tour

guide heedless of the tourists. He pictures Jude’s “dark complexion, with dark harmonizing eyes . . . closely trimmed black beard, [and] . . . great mass of black curly hair”—mixed, he adds, with stonedust (II,1,63)—at the moment when Jude, who is walking into the city of his dreams for the first time in his life, feels like a spectre, like “one who walked but could not make himself seen” (65). This sharply focused image is admonitory: Jude, dusty, hairy, and on foot, is visibly earthbound, whether he knows it or not.

Nonetheless, whatever stasis Jude Fawley achieves is the stasis of perpetual motion: unseen by anyone in Christminster except a lone policeman, he keeps on walking. In the beginning, scouting customers for Physician Vilbert, then delivering bread for Aunt Drusilla, and then walking to and from Alfredston while he learns his trade, Jude is always on the move. In the end, Jude and Sue are at their happiest when leading “a shifting, almost nomadic, life” (V,7,245), their relation to any given location becoming more and more tenuous, their movements more and more trivial, their accommodations—when they arrive back in Christminster, for instance—more and more temporary.

Motion and temporality coalesce, for these nomads, the one the sign of the other. Their arrival in Christminster, described in the first chapter of the sixth part of the novel, is a detailed illustration of that symbiosis. Hardy’s attention never wavers: his narrative, like Jude’s life, is almost over, and everything he sees is caught in time. The day itself marks a yearly event when the colleges of Christminster, mindful of time, remember their own. Jude has secretly waited for Remembrance Day, timing his return to coincide with it. Humiliation Day, he calls it, noticing the place where, a long time before, his academic hopes had been abandoned. Then he joins a crowd of “expectant” people, all passing the time until the great procession will go by. Little Time, “submerged and invisible in the crowd,” says he does not like Christminster very much; but Jude is obsessed with his own commemoration, and he pays no attention. Instead, he responds to the “idlers” themselves, a few of whom have recognized him—and his failure. “It takes two or three generations,” he tells them, “to do what I tried to do in one” (257). Time rules everywhere here in Christminster, even though little Time cannot be seen: in Jude’s obsession, in the waiting crowd, in the public anniversary, “I’m an outsider to the end of my days” (259), Jude concludes. The end of his days is exactly one year away.

Meanwhile, the afternoon is drawing to a close and lodgings must be found. Jude, Sue, and the children go from place to place, looking. Finally, time running out, they agree to a temporary separation, “til Jude had time to get a more permanent abode” (261). That evening, the landlady tells Sue (whose third pregnancy is also binding her to time) that she and the children may stay only one night. And at some point during that one night, little Time acts on his belief that he and his siblings ought never to have been born. When Jude hears Sue scream, his attention, in imitation of Hardy’s, is fixed on the watch held in his hand. He is timing the breakfast eggs.

8. Jude and Sue like to converse while walking and to walk in order to converse: see V.1 and VI,4.
Jude consulted his pocket watch on his way to take Arabella for their first walk together, figuring he would have “a good long time” to read after he got home again (I,7,38). That same watch is hanging “by way of timepiece” in the room where Jude lies dying (VI,11,319). On its face, time is made legible, inscribed like the letters on the face of a tombstone, or like an ancient road on the surface of the earth. All his life, his watch in his pocket, Jude has walked along such roads, leaving traces of his history. Thus the ground, like his watch, tells time. And crossing it takes Jude’s time away.

The essential conjunction of space and time, though it is never stated in conceptual terms, is a first principle in the logic of Jude the Obscure.9 It is spelled out at the very beginning of Jude’s story when time passes, the earth turns, the clouds part, and the setting sun comes out, revealing as if by magic the gleaming spires and domes of Christminster, city of Jude’s future (1,3,19). Everyone in Jude the Obscure abides by that conjunction, from Jude and Arabella’s son, crushed by his vision of a “great Atlantic of Time” (V,3,218), to Physician Vilbert, his movements “as truly timed as those of the planets in their courses” (I,4,24), to Sue Bridehead, counting the minutes—seven each way—it would take Jude, “with ordinary walking pace,” to get to and from Arabella’s lodging (V,2,209). Time, here, is inseparable from distance: space is time’s measure, time’s picture, time made visible, time—like Jude—brought down to earth.

The most striking and pervasive image of this union in Jude the Obscure is the railway system, a “powerful organization”10 covering England with its lines and junctures and run strictly according to time.11 Its control is exercised continually. Missing the train to Melchester, for instance, costs Sue her reputation. The four-o’clock train to Shaston gets Jude there much too early, but if he wants to see Sue he must take it anyway (IV,1,160). To find the composer of “The Foot of the Cross,” Jude has to get up at daybreak and take a long “series of crooked railways” (III,10,156). Hoping to meet Sue, now married to Phillotson, and go with her to visit his ailing aunt, Jude contrives an even more intricate adjustment: his down-train crosses her up-train at the Alfredston Road station, and he will wait for her there (III,8,142). As it turns out, Jude takes the train to Aldbrickham with Arabella instead. Hardy informs us, without comment, that it only took them half an hour to get there.

Examples of these references to railway lines and railway schedules multiply quickly, but the reason remains the same: whatever their “ideals” and however much they move about, human beings in Jude the Obscure are enclosed in materiality. Like a rabbit in a springe or a pigeon in a cage, they are enclosed in space and in time. Hardy’s narrative is saturated with reminders of this law. For

9. See Bert G. Hornbeck, The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1971), p. 8, who comments that the “significance of space, or place, is always its historical or temporal aspect for Hardy.”
10. Sue’s phrase (IV,5,188). Sue’s modernity is exemplified in her attitude toward trains. See her pleasure when the train makes a special stop for her (189) or her simile (“as the railway companies say of their trains” [III,7,1.351]) about accelerating the date of her marriage to Phillotson.
11. See David Lodge, “Jude the Obscure: Pessimism and Fictional Form,” Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy, ed. Dale Kramer (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 201. note 5, for the suggestion that the railway in Jude the Obscure is a symbol for “life itself.”
instance, though Challow the pig killer does not come on time, the pig must nonetheless be killed. Little Time must be made welcome though he arrives weeks before he is expected. The stone work on the music hall at Quartershot must be finished by a fixed day though it cost Jude his health. The boat race must start on time, and Arabella must not miss it, though Jude is lying dead. And so on. Jude and Sue are afraid of marriage because they have become afraid of time. Little Time, his words like Time itself emerging “as if out of the earth” (V, 4, 223), is right to advise them against it. That both their remarriages are timed with great precision (Arabella sees to it that Jude has just the right amount of alcohol in him, and Sue carefully arrives back in Marygreen at just after four o’clock on a Friday afternoon) is one more instance. Hardy—calling himself a “chronicler” (V, 5, 228)—makes his case bit by bit: nothing is timeless in Jude the Obscure. This narrative principle is more than a convention of ordinary realism. In Jude the Obscure it is a pervasive and implacable law of life.

Hardy’s case, of course, is complete by the close of day one when the child Jude runs home to the village in the dark, the lights of Christminster having gone out “like extinguished candles” (I, 3, 19). Thus ends the introductory movement of the novel—a movement carefully time-bound: from morning to night on the day Phillotson leaves town. Marygreen, an ancient hamlet too obscure, perhaps, to have figured earlier in Hardy’s fiction,12 “rests in the lap of an undulating upland” (I, 1, 11) in mute resistance to Phillotson’s willingness to move. Jude thinks of it as sleepy. To Hardy’s narrator Marygreen is time-honored, the site of generations of human history, its “tall” new church an insult to the living as well as to the dead in their newly obliterated graves. The village well is different: sunk a hundred feet into the ground, it is as ancient as Marygreen itself. And like Marygreen, it signifies time. Jude’s thoughts, as he looks down into it after Phillotson’s departure, are shaped by that signification. He is learning one of his earliest lessons, taught him by his earliest teacher:

He said to himself, in the melodramatic tones of a whimsical boy, that the schoolmaster had drawn at that well scores of times on a morning like this, and would never draw there any more. “I’ve seen him look down into it, when he was tired with his drawing, just as I do now, and when he rested a bit before carrying the buckets home! But he was too clever to bide here any longer—a small, sleepy place like this!” (I, 1, 11)

This alignment of past, present, and future is a habit of thought Jude never breaks. It stays with him the rest of his life—the conception of time stretched out in linear fashion like the roads and railway lines he follows to get from one place to another or the intellectual and moral progress he hopes to make. The fresh harrow lines cut across Farmer Troutham’s field, “like channelling on a piece of new corduroy” (11), prefigure this linearity, and “thither,” carved in stone, becomes its sign. These inscriptions picture time as lines moving across the earth, out of the past and into the future.13 But the ancient well at the center of


13. See J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970). p. 200, on “time as a pattern in space” as an invitation to fatalization irresistible to Hardy.
Marygreen goes deep into the earth, not over it, and it stays in place. It offers Jude not lines but circles—a “shining disk of quivering water” at the end of “a long circular perspective” (11)—and an alternate image of time. It absorbs his tears.

Circularity is so typical of Jude’s early life, the “long tideless time” he spends “inside and round about” his aunt’s bake shop (I,3,19–20), that it is easy to miss, the way Jude only notices the circuits of the setting sun and the rising moon when they happen to occur simultaneously (I,5,29). The rocks over Farmer Troutham’s cornfield, for instance, “wheel” in circles, too. When they begin “going round and round in an amazing circular race,” however, it is because Jude himself is being helplessly whirled by his irate employer. Spinning, he cries “O, O, O!”—a one syllable version of the second lesson of the day, the second lesson about time (I,2,15). “All around you,” Jude thinks to himself, after he gets home, “there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it” (17). At the time, Jude is gazing at the “white brightness” of the sun through the interstices of his straw hat, just as he gazed that morning into the shining water at the bottom of the village well, and once again he is finding the words for what he has learned: your life, like a little cell, is at the center of something, surrounded by something. Getting older and wiser, you feel yourself “to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference” (17). You do not just travel across your time, that is to say; you are enclosed in it, encircled by it.

Farmer Troutham’s field, though it is covered with fresh harrow lines, is also a huge circle, a “vast concave” whose “brown surface” goes “right up to the sky all round” until it is “lost by degrees in the mist” (13). It is the prototypical image in Jude the Obscure of time’s spaciousness and visibility. It must be crossed in order to get to Christminster. Beyond it, in ever widening rings, lies “the whole northern semicircle between east and west to a distance of forty or fifty miles” (I,3,18), a vista Jude never laid eyes on before. And even farther, barely visible at night on the northern horizon (19), and again at the end of a long circular perspective, a glowing halo is overarching the city itself (20).

Nothing is timeless in Jude the Obscure, but from the beginning the figures of time are divided, unsimple. Time as encirclement and time as linearity, though inscribed on a single cornfield, are not the same. Jude’s early consciousness of himself at the dizzying center of encircling time is quite different from seeing

14. See Hornbeck (p. 139, note 3), who points out that in this sentence Hardy substituted the word “time” for the word “space.”
15. It will again be crossed when Jude first goes out to meet Arabella (I,7,38); then again by Jude and Sue coming to see Aunt Drusilla (III,9,152); then by Jude when his aunt finally dies (IV,2,165); and again by Sue. come down from Shaston for the funeral (166). At the end of his life, “knowing that his eyes would light on that scene no more” (VI,8,310), Jude turns and looks back on that field one last time.
16. Hardy’s narrative reaches farther still, back into history, as when Jude and Arabella, still courting, wander up the hills to the green track along the ridge, which they followed to the circular British earth-bank adjoining. Jude thinking of the great age of the trackway, and of the drovers who had frequented it, probably before the Romans knew the country. (I,8,46)

In Darwin’s Plots (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1983. p. 249), Gillian Beer remarks that “the problem of finding a scale for the human becomes a besetting preoccupation of Hardy’s works,” there being “no privileged place” for the human being in Darwinian vistas. Here, Hardy limits himself to the earliest traces of human life.
himself advancing out of the past and into the future—the path taken by the schoolmaster quite different from the centrifugal circles spun by the farmer. Yet the story to come will enact them both. Jude will rely on a line that in time leads him to the center of Christminster, where his dying wish is never to have been born, to disappear out of the world. In time, Hardy’s scrupulous reticule of that journey will have surrounded Jude, capturing him just as he captured Jude’s appearance when he entered Christminster for the first time, making certain that Jude not be forgotten. Underlying this division between obfuscation and remembrance at the conclusion of Jude’s history is the division between time’s linearity and its encirclement established at the beginning. Time and space are one in the logic of Jude the Obscure: doubleness is elsewhere in those lines and circles; and the pages of Jude the Obscure are covered with them.

Reliance on time’s linearity is what gets Jude started—putting in his time as an apprentice, and learning Latin and Greek, word by word by word. It endorses his belief in intellectual progress, a belief he never gives up. “Every man has some little power in some one direction,” he tells Arabella from his last sickbed, as if the mind itself were a traveller, and travel meant improvement (V,1,10,316). “As for Sue and me,” he tells Mrs. Edlin a little later, “... the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon” (318), as if improvement were only a matter of time. It also endorses Jude’s belief that the unripe past can be left behind and that obliteration is possible, a belief that leads Jude on from one place to the next for most of his life. “We mustn’t go to Alfredston, or to Melchester, or to Shaston, or to Christminster,” he tells little Time on the day their furniture is sold off. “Apart from those,” he adds cheerfully, “we can go anywhere” (V,6,244), as if moving on were all there were to it. But above all, the linearity of time encourages Jude to believe that the future, even though it has not yet come into being, is somehow in front of him, like a town he has not yet visited, a town where nobody knows him. For Jude the future thus conceived is all he knows of ideality. At the same time it is ineluctably earthbound, a place like the college in Christminster his son might one day enter (V,3,220) in which Jude himself has not yet set foot.18

Believing in such a future, in such a past, and in the capacity of human beings to proceed from one to the other carries Jude forward during most of his life. Now and then, however, these beliefs are subverted by suggestions of time’s circularity, by the several reminders, for instance, of Marygreen’s ancient well, of the pages of Jude the Obscure: doubleness is elsewhere in those lines and circles; and the pages of Jude the Obscure are covered with them.

17. Hardy’s bitter references in the first chapter of Jude the Obscure to Marygreen’s lost houses, trees, church, and graveyard make his attitude toward the obliteration of “historical records” very clear.

18. Sue’s relation to time as “progress” is as unexamined as Jude’s, witness her remark to Jude that “everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that’s all” (V,4,227), or her revision of the New Testament in “chronological order as written” (III,4,121), or her assumption that she is ahead of Jude on the road to intellectual maturity (121). She too would let the past disappear (“I feel crushed into earth,” she says of her home in Shaston, “by the weight of so many previous lives there spent” [IV,1,161]). She too would look forward to a better future: “When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say!” (IV,2,171). For an extended treatment of Hardy’s portrayal of Sue, which he calls “a work of genius,” see Robert B. Heilman. Introduction, Jude the Obscure, by Thomas Hardy (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 1–46. The phrase is found on p. 28.
“large round pond” (1,11,59) in the center of which Jude once tried to drown himself, by his passing sense that the future might contain not a new location but “a tragic sadness . . . intensified to a tragic horror” (II,2,74), or by his momentary realization that at Fourways, in the middle of Christminster, the past is not lost but preserved, not left behind but kept (II,6,96). And in the end the children who might have entered those future places are dead, and all the rest, Arabella and Phillotson included, have circled back to where they began—like the rooks on Farmer Troutham’s circular field that fly up and return, fly up and return.

The words to express the power of this impulse, this recurrent pattern of return to earth, are given—appropriately—to Arabella, when she advises Phillotson that he should never have let Sue go: “She’d have come round in time,” she tells him. “We all do! Custom does it! It’s all the same in the end!” (V,8,252). Gillingham also expresses it in his congratulations on Phillotson’s and Sue’s remarriage: “I shall be able to tell the people in your native place a good round tale,” he promises the bridegroom warmly, “and they’ll all say ‘Well done’ ” (VI,5,293). Round, customary tales are not told of people whose lives elude the past, who live ahead of their time, who end up in new places. They are told of people who live “rounded lives,” like the people little Time watches as he journeys across the world to Jude (V,3,219). They are told of people whose lives, repeating the past, are enclosed in time, not just written across it.

Such a tale, round and customary, is Jude the Obscure. Not only does its telling elucidate the linearity of Jude’s movements from place to place in the very process of recording them, but also, as if counteracting the whole conception of linearity, the telling of Jude the Obscure enforces the circularity of Jude’s history. It is at once diachronic, obsessively noting time of day (arrival and departure times in particular), time of year, and time of life, full of clocks on the mantel and minutes ticking by—and synchronic, careful to bring the past into the present, and carefully following the separate but concurrent lives of its four main characters, the word “meanwhile” its most useful narrative tag. Reading Jude the Obscure is like entering an intricately constructed time machine with what you only gradually realize is a round-trip ticket.

Hardy’s resistance to a linear definition of time accumulates little by little like the accumulation of places where Jude, Sue, and their children dare not go. It takes the form of their gradually accumulated history: a past Hardy—unlike Jude—will not permit to be left behind. The text of Jude the Obscure preserves Jude’s past willy-nilly, but its continual presence in the ongoing narrative is a matter of choice; and Hardy chooses never to forget. Sometimes it is explicit as when Arabella leads Jude, who is drunk, step by painful step up the stairs in her father’s pork shop and Hardy refers back to the cottage at Cresscombe (VI,6,298), where Jude had rushed straight up the stairs at her heels (1,8,47); sometimes it is implicit—as when Jude, in a rage, forces Arabella never to speak of Sue again,

20. Hardy mentions only the cottage. Remembering Jude’s headlong rush up the stairs is left to the reader.
just as he had forced her long before to leave his books alone. Both times he holds her down. Both times she makes her promise. Both times she answers “I do” (1,11,57;VI,8,306). Hardy’s narrator does not comment on that reiteration, but the echo is there like the distant, ironic echo of Sue’s intellectual leadership, hidden in Arabella’s leading Jude on a “personally conducted” tour through the “varieties of spirituous delectation”—she being one who “knew the landmarks well” (VI,6,297).

Cross references like these come thick and fast at the end of Jude the Obscure, often with painful emphasis as when the dead Jude is said to have been laid out on his bedstead “straight as an arrow” (VI,11,323)—the same phrase Hardy had earlier applied to Arabella as once long ago she lay down on a hilltop near Marygreen, alive and inviting, gazing up into the sky and “retaining her warm hold of Jude’s hand” (I,8,45). Reference to pigs, on the other hand, occurs repeatedly, making a greasy thread through the whole fabric of the novel, until Arabella, exasperated over Jude’s inability to work, threatens to make black-pot and sausages and “hawk ‘em about the street” (VI,8,305), an echo reaching not only back in time to when Jude kicked over the pail of pig’s blood and spoiled his bride’s black-pot, but also across time to Sue, selling Christminster cakes on the main street of Kennetbridge while Jude rested at home, the cakes themselves being the end of a long series of references both direct and indirect to Jude’s city of “fixed vision” (V,7,247–48). Thus memory serves in Jude the Obscure, where nothing is timeless and nothing—in time—is lost.

The most haunting recurrence in Jude the Obscure ends when Jude “drearily” agrees to put up a headstone for his own dead children (VI,3,275). Ever since he first learned to carve, Jude, though he did not know it, has been rehearsing this task, and when it is complete he never carves another. Hardy’s many references to graves, gravemarkers, funeral processions, and cemeteries, though they may not register on Jude, build to a pitiable climax when the by now familiar burial process is interrupted and poor Sue, who once thought she could forget twenty-five centuries of human history and return to “Greek joyousness” (V,5,235), climbs down into the half-filled hole that will be the children’s common grave and begs Jude to let her see them again for “only just one little minute” (VI,2,270).

This burial harks back with piercing clarity to Hardy’s earlier reminders that dying means going into ground (“I thought you were underground years ago,” Arabella said to Jude when they met again at Christminster [III,8,144]), that dying puts you deep into the center of your time, like Jude’s tear, lost in the shining water. It marks the extinction of Jude’s belief in futurity, his belief in new places. Jude and Sue’s return to the cemetery for their farewell conversation is the beginning of all those other returns, those closed circles drawn one after the other like the closing figures of a quadrille.22

Jude’s own circular dance ends where it must, in the center of the city he

21. See especially the burial procession unnoticed by Jude and Sue, who are kissing each other behind the pillar of a church, having once again decided not to tie the knot (V,4,227).
finally knows he can never leave behind. In the end the dying Jude is surrounded by his own unforgettable history. Hearing shouts and hurrahs coming up from the river, Jude suddenly realizes where he is: “‘Ah—yes! The Remembrance Games,’ he says to himself. ‘And I here. And Sue defiled!’” (VI, 11,320). These insights are excruciating because of their simultaneity: they are all present at once. Thus nothing is lost. The only alternative is never to have been born at all, and Jude dies with that futile wish on his lips, uttered by means of a recitation from the third chapter of the Book of Job—another indication that the past is indelible, that once set down in words, it can live for centuries. Jude’s wish, like Job’s, will not come true.23

H A R D Y’s unwillingness to grant that wish, to accept the linearity of time and thus the possibility of obliteration, underlies his choice of the words that capture Jude Fawley’s life. From the first Hardy’s words have located Jude, repeatedly fixing him with great precision in space and in time and also in the materiality of the words themselves, as if that fixation were the only way to tell about him. Jude’s story is a series of situations, standing in silent contradiction to his idealistic hopes. “We must sail under sealed orders,” Jude tells his worried son, “that nobody may trace us” (V,6,244), but Jude, Sue, and their children are traced, like it or not.24 They may think, for example, that they are unseen, obscure, and therefore “free” at the Great Wessex Agricultural Show on the “certain day . . . in the particular year which has now been reached by this narrative” (V,5,229), but in Jude the Obscure obscurity is forbidden. They are looked at very closely indeed—by Arabella, Anny, Cartlett, Dr. Vilbert, and by Hardy himself, whose narrator even takes note of Sue’s “little thumb, stuck up by the stem of her white cotton sunshade” (231), a gesture with its own particular history, Hardy having pointed it out long before when Sue first went walking with Phillotson (II,5,86).

Hardy’s observation of his characters is like the rest of the world’s: looking so closely, remembering so well, he becomes their antagonist—for if the material, conventional world thwarts Jude, it also sustains the telling of his story. Turning Jude Fawley into words in a novel materializes him, enclosing him in the conventionality of language itself. In Jude the Obscure Hardy’s narrative does not defy the gods of conventional materialism: it exhibits them.

Jude would walk out of the world without a trace if he could find the way to what he once called “the heavenly Jerusalem” (I,3,18). But when he walks out of Marygreen, having parted from Sue for the last time, he knows he never will. On the crest of the hill near the Brown House, “in the teeth of the north-west wind and rain” (VI,8,310), Jude gives way to his fatigue. He spreads out his blanket and lies down on the ground to rest, his attachment to the earth itself once again

23. Jude and Sue’s habitual use of quotations in ordinary conversation also implies this permanence.
24. On the same page on which Jude speaks of not being traced, Hardy comments (V,7,244–45), “Whither they had gone nobody knew, chiefly because nobody cared to know. Any one sufficiently curious to trace the steps of such an obscure pair might have discovered without great trouble that . . . .”
confirmed. It is as if Jude were already passing into it, being absorbed by it, like
the mossy stone he lays hold of on which the word "thither"—now pointing to
the site of Jude’s unrealized hopes—can still be felt.

Jude has always been drawn to what he could touch—books, pictures,
models, bread, furniture, the tools and stones of his trade. Even the words he
teaches himself to read, painstakingly acquiring them one by one, letter by letter,
seem peculiarly physical, very like the words he carves stroke by stroke in stone,
words like “thither,” that are there to stay. Jude’s words, both those he carves and
those he commits to memory, are in this sense analogous to Hardy’s: they have
been inscribed, not simply conceived. They are not transparent, magic windows
opening on to ideality, but opaque, like stone. The letter can kill, Jude reminds
Sue, repeating Hardy’s epigraph, itself a quotation from the New Testament
(VI,8,308). It can turn to stone.

Jude’s statuesque, marble-featured figure, laid out in his coffin for Arabella
and Mrs. Edlin’s final inspection, completes the analogy. Lifeless, he has now
become Hardy’s raw material, the substance of Hardy’s utterance, nothing but
words. Hardy’s realist fiction can, and will, go no further. At the sound of the
Remembrance Week speeches—an “occasional word” floating in through the
open window of the dead man’s centrally-located room—Hardy can see a smile
“of some sort” form on Jude’s dead face and an increased pallor form on the
surface (rough with stone-dust) of Jude’s few remaining books (VI,11,324). It is
all one, here at the end: Hardy, imagining that smile, is putting Jude into his own
words like the speech he imagines floating across the air and the books he
imagines turning pale. Jude’s life, now finished, is going to be told.

Telling over Jude’s life, translating it into Jude the Obscure and imprinting
it on the pages of a book, preserves it, just as Jude and Arabella’s footprints on
the road to Alfredston preserve their embrace, as the Ten Commandments,
inscribed on the wall of a country church, preserve the law, or as the circles and
lines drawn on the surface of the earth by the cornfields and highways of Wessex
preserve the experience of time. The imagination of that early reviewer may have
found these inscriptions hateful, expressive as they are of sheer materiality—
paper, ink, dust, and stones; but in Jude the Obscure the alternative has no name.
Sue’s and Jude’s “shattered ideals” form what Hardy, writing in 1912, called “the
greater part of the story” (Postscript, 6), but in the telling of Jude the Obscure
ideality is nonexistent, unthinkable, unspeakable. It lies beyond consciousness
in the “empty surrounding space,” the “absolute solitude” (I,8,45) of which Jude
and Arabella, lying side by side on the hilltop near Marygreen, know nothing. It
is beyond the mist into which the verge of Farmer Troutham’s circular field is lost
(1,2,13), beyond the fog that obscures Jude’s view of Melchester’s cathedral
spire (III,1,105). Into it everything vanishes: space fades to featureless nothing-
ness, and time expands to a vastness into which everything human, including
words, disappears.

25. The opening sentence of the last chapter of Jude the Obscure is a reminder of this process: “The last pages
to which the chronicler of these lives would ask the reader’s attention are concerned with the scene in and out of
Jude’s bedroom when leafy summer came round again.”
Little Time, the child of that couple lying alone together under the sky, went
to his death unbaptized, nameless, taking with him his glimpse of the unname-
able abstraction, the “wide dark world” devoid of any human particularity
(V,3,220). This huge anonymous landscape Hardy fills with the words of Jude
the Obscure. They tell of a short, narrow life, bound in the necessities of its own
situation as well as its own human body, but, for now, they are better than
nothing.