Thomas Hardy's Groundwork

DANIEL WRIGHT

IN *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD* (1874), THOMAS HARDY'S NARRATOR describes the "obliteration by snow" of the landscape of Melchester Moor:

> [F]or the first time in the season its irregularities were forms without features; suggestive of anything, proclaiming nothing, and without more character than that of being the limit of something else—the lowest layer of a firmament of snow. From this chaotic skyful of crowding flakes the mead and moor momentarily received additional clothing, only to appear momentarily more naked thereby. . . . [T]he instinctive thought was that the snow lining the heavens and that encrusting the earth would soon unite into one mass without any intervening stratum of air at all. (85)

Hardy's "forms without features" are linked to those strangely empty words : "anything," "nothing," "something." We are urged to remember that form does not finally dissolve in this winter scene, even if it threatens to; rather, it "momentarily" loses the features that give it texture, life, and detail. Anything, nothing, something: these pronouns have antecedents, but "anything" points indifferently at a wide field of possibility in which the object we seek is simply any specific thing at all rising out of the void; "nothing" stands in for an absence; and "something" just barely registers the presence of an object that has lost its nameable identity, out of mere forgetfulness perhaps, or out of the more total kind of erasure that Hardy's blizzard scene dramatizes, in which the best we can do is make out some hazy thing just out of reach of the eye, even just out of reach of the narrator's omniscience, as the limits, layers, and strata that organize the world are overrun.

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PMLA 134.5 (2019), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The overwhelming whiteness blanketing Hardy's scene, turning it into a cluster of featureless forms, makes it something like a canvas covered over with primer before the painter begins anew; but in the aesthetic purposefulness of this set of white-on-white shapes, the scene is perhaps even more akin to Robert Rauschenberg's white canvases, his early experiments in the minimalism that critiqued the wild, spilling, colorful forms of abstract expressionism, and perhaps the apotheosis of Rauschenberg's invention, as Leo Steinberg famously claimed, of the "flatbed picture plane," which "makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, or impressed—whether coherently or in confusion" (84). Like Rauschenberg's triptych of 1951 (*White Painting*), in which the only points of respite from the blank expanse of the work are the slim, shadowy gaps between the abutting canvases, Hardy's "forms without features" experiment with the bareness of formal organization offered by one empty, white field being nothing more than "the limit of something else." But while Rauschenberg's canvases hang on a gallery wall, still and flat, exposing the receptive plane on which any picture must be built, Hardy's blizzard scene is just that—a scene drawn out of a narrative, a scene in which detail is scrubbed out but then slowly restored, as the narrator asks us to "turn our attention to the left-hand characteristics" of the vista, "which were flatness in respect to the river, verticality in respect of the wall behind it, and darkness as to both" (86). The outlines are filled in with features again. Shades of darkness regain meaning.

In this essay, I follow the metaphor of "groundwork" through Hardy's fiction as a way of accessing the metaphysical problems that inform his ironic relationship to novelistic realism. As we will see, *groundwork* is a word of which Hardy himself was fond. He uses the term *groundwork* in his fiction to point to the seemingly inert field in which details—objects, events, features, steps, episodes—develop and move, but he deploys it precisely to debunk the idea of its inertness or its indifference, as he does when he describes Thomasin Yeobright's face in *The Return of the Native* (1878): "The groundwork of the face was hopefulness; but over it now lay like a foreign substance a film of anxiety and grief" (41). Groundwork and what lies over it may be at odds, and this description seems to call out for us to strip away that dirtying "foreign substance" to reveal the pristine ground that glimmers through from underneath. In fact, in this case, groundwork contains the essential truth of Thomasin's identity. It is not the mere primer over which a painting takes shape, but the painting itself, or at least a rough sketch, temporarily obscured by an accumulation of grime. What Peter Casagrande once described as Hardy's "deteriorism"—his status as "a believer . . . in the absolute superiority of first things who was always tormented by the intellectual certainty that first things are beyond recovery" (7)—might partially clarify the nature of Hardy's ambivalence about groundwork. Is groundwork a first thing, the foundation on which the world of the novel is built, which the novelist can expose only fitfully or indirectly? Or is it a last thing, the featureless sediment left behind when details deteriorate or decay, a corrosive force against which the narrator struggles to maintain the relation between form and content, between outlines and the features that give them meaning?

I argue that in Hardy's fiction the question is unresolvable, but that keeping alive the paradoxical interaction between these different kinds of metaphysical problems is precisely his intention as he asks us to reckon with the groundwork as a neglected, even forgotten, but nevertheless indispensable form: the form without features, divisible anywhere and everywhere; the space whose

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

still emptiness is itself a kind of chaos, an undecided and undecidable blizzard. Hardy famously declared that "'realism' is not Art," because the goal of art should be "a disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked" (*Life* 239). The groundwork is, paradoxically, just such a feature that matters: the featureless feature, the blank field that is overlooked but is essential to all the things and locations that organize themselves within the open possibilities of its blankness. At the same time, it is the form as the last feature standing when everything is stripped away, the chaotic blankness that might reassert itself whether we like it or not, leaving us bereft and disoriented. Noticing the ways in which Hardy opens the groundwork to view helps us understand his vexation at a realism that would only copy or inventory or observe. He wonders what happens when that inventory of realist details becomes obscured to the point of blankness, the fictional world deprived of all but its barest outlines.

My reading of Hardy aims to contribute, then, to a theoretical conversation about the novel as a genre of denotation and reference, a conversation that has also problematized and reinvigorated our historicist reading protocols. For example, Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt argue that a practice of denotative reading might attune us to the literal (and literary) significance of the "denotative, literal, and technical language," such as the mining jargon in Zola's *Germinal*, that "has heretofore given us space to breathe, allowing us to look through or around rather than at it" (4). Hardy, however, asks us to attend to the obdurate but abstract groundwork rather than to the concrete object, to dark matter rather than to visible matter, in order to activate problems of denotation different from those Freedgood and Schmitt have in mind. Taking another approach, Jami Bartlett pursues denotation to its philosophical foundations, understanding the novel as a genre that addresses the problem of "'reference' itself" through its dramatization of "the instabilities that surround and characterize the referential act" (13, 26). Unlike Freedgood and Schmitt's, Bartlett's subject is therefore "not the thing that is said or described, but the criteria that underlie the process of saying something about it" (26). Despite some differences in our aims, I join Freedgood, Schmitt, and Bartlett in understanding the realist novel not only as performing denotation and reference but also as exposing the groundwork of such acts of linguistic pointing and as laying bare the field, sometimes threatening and sometimes strangely inviting, that holds together the world of the novel.

Methodologically speaking, drawing attention to the groundwork is an antihistoricist move (or, less polemically, an ahistorical one), whether on my part as a critic or on Hardy's part as a novelist, because it temporarily removes from consideration the grounds of historicist reading practices—material detail, the textures of ordinary life, the institutional mechanisms of ideology—in favor of a ground so featureless it gives us vertigo, or maybe thrills us by setting us loose, releasing us from the constraints of the physical into the speculative possibilities of the metaphysical. A great deal may be lost in turning our attention away from Hardy's interest in land, labor, and property, an interest that certainly does undergird many of the scenes I read in this essay, but I hope that the turn away from the material and the historical may also make visible a set of questions about groundwork that are obscured when we take its "ground" and its "work" literally rather than metaphorically. In this sense, my reading of Hardy adds to Anna Kornbluh's theory of a "nonmimetic realism," which "negates and exceeds what exists," as opposed to a realism that would only "represent, depict,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

denote, or refer" ("Realist Blueprint" 204). While Hardy's novels do represent a world much like the real one, they may aim not just to perform mimesis but also to show, as part of the performance, how mimesis works, what strange blankness might appear through its gaps and around its unfinished edges: Hardy's fiction might investigate metaphysical questions about fiction that are not available to a realism imagined as purely representational or denotative, or to a historicism interested in groundwork as a concept related primarily to labor, economic value, and enclosure.

But Hardy has already shown in his blizzard scene that the negation of mimesis, the return to the drawing board to find the ground of existence, while liberating, can also be terrifying. As Sara Ahmed argues, to upset the relation between the ground and the body it supports—to "throw the body from its ground"—is to lose one's bearings: "Disorientation as a bodily feeling . . . can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable" (157). But we might need such an experience of ungrounding, Ahmed insists, in order to start anew, to reorganize, to take up a queer orientation, "a way of inhabiting the world at the point in which things fleet" (172). To point to the groundwork might be a way of expressing a desire for just such an openness of possibility, something like Roland Barthes's desire for "the neutral" as the "moment when within the original nondifferentiation something begins to be sketched, tone on tone, the first differences" (50). We might understand the novelistic denotation of a colorless field of mere existence or being, in other words, as an evasion of reality and its pressures, the ruse of a writer fleeing to metaphysics in order to mystify the solidity of the real.

But on the contrary, I argue that pointing our attention to the groundwork allows Hardy to find a surer footing for realism, a deeper sense of how reality feels, and a wider and solider foundation for the methods and metaphors by which we come to know and to formalize our sense of being in the world. As I will argue more fully later on, Hardy's groundwork attempts to conjure a totality different from the one dreamed up by Georg Lukács as the novel's lost object, a smooth field somewhere underneath it all that is usually hidden or just ignored but exists even when our focus is elsewhere and can be made visible with some effort. As whiteness, blackness, and brownness come to constitute the basic color palette of Hardy's groundwork, however, we must insist that Hardy's ontological abstraction is not only an aesthetic experiment but also an assertion of power, and a function of the privilege that Fred Moten analyzes in his reading of the metaphysics of race. If, as Moten insists, "blackness is prior to ontology, . . . ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space," then we must understand Hardy's movements in and around the blankness of the groundwork—a blankness that is sometimes white but sometimes appears as a brown face without features or an expanse of bestial, wounded black skin—as movements perhaps more easily available to the white novelist than to the novelist of color (739). Moten's method also helps demonstrate that metaphysical questions can be vitally connected to social and political questions. What appears to negate reality (Hardy's farms, his laborers, his real landscapes) may actually supplement it.

A long tradition in Hardy criticism has viewed Hardy's relation to realism as unique, ornery, or simply indeterminate, but this tradition has focused mostly on the epistemological and aesthetic problems of realism. Few have attended to the metaphysical paradoxes that seem to have prompted Hardy's sense that inventorying details, features, and things does not give us a deep or complex enough picture of reality, the kind of paradoxes that emerge in Moten's connection of the ontology

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of blackness to the social reality of black life. A succession of critics—Mary Jacobus, Elaine Scarry (in "Participial Acts"), J. Hillis Miller (in both *Topographies* and his more recent *Communities in Fiction*), Linda M. Shires, Michael Irwin, Megan Ward, and Audrey Jaffe foremost among them—have detailed in exciting ways Hardy's immanent critique of the pastoral mode and its reverence for nature and landscape as stable grounds both for the literary imagination and for human work and inhabitation. Others, such as J. B. Bullen, Sheila Berger, Elaine Auyoung, and Jaffe again, have pointed to Hardy's self-consciousness about the artifice and the cognitive demands of realist mimesis and its analogues in visual perception, art, and drawing. Recently, Kornbluh has argued that geometric abstraction underlies Hardy's realism, tracing his meticulous attention in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) to linear and typographic forms as ways of imagining the rigid force of social norms ("Obscure Forms"); and William A. Cohen, Elisha Cohn, Alicia Christoff, and Anna Henchman have emphasized in different ways Hardy's abiding interest in the extreme instability of embodiment, psychological interiority, and sensation.

I share with all these critics a sense of Hardy's antifoundationalism: his deep skepticism about any thing, category, concept, or value that might seem uncomplicatedly to ground our understanding of reality, let alone our literary representation of it. However, I want to train our attention on the metaphysical perplexity, rather than the epistemic uncertainty, that arises from this skepticism of foundations. What if reality itself, not only our perception of it, is uncertain and unstable? The groundwork represents an important formal paradox for Hardy as he tries to reconstruct such metaphysical vertigo in the structuring of his fictional worlds: how do we reckon with the ground that also ungrounds, the underlying blank field that does not depend on any particular kind of organization? But he also thematizes this formal problem frequently, as a pragmatic problem for his characters. How does one find one's way in a world in which intervals and locations might be unreal, in which movement might be only wishful thinking? What if that blank groundwork, which threatens to unmoor me from the comforting solidity of the ordinary world like a fugue state or a delusion, is in fact just as real as anything?

The relation of a stable "groundwork" to a contingent "finish" appears here and there as a kind of folk wisdom in Hardy's world. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), Reuben Dewy advises his son Dick that potential lovers "be all alike in the groundwork; 'tis only in the flourishes there's a difference" (108); but this advice is a reversal of his earlier decision not to get involved in the love affairs of others, since "the uncertain phenomenon of love, as it existed in other people, was not a groundwork upon which a single action of his own life could be founded" (92). In *Far from the Madding Crowd,* the destitute Fanny Robin's face is described as "young in the groundwork, old in the finish; the general contours were flexuous and childlike, but the finer lineaments had begun to be sharp and thin" (258). A minor character in *The Return of the Native* insults the appearance of Diggory Venn, the "reddleman" whose skin has been dyed red by the plying of his trade, only to excuse himself by insisting that "ye bain't bad-looking in the groundwork, though the finish is queer" (34). Of Mrs. Yeobright in the same novel, we are told that "[t]he philosophy of her nature . . . was almost written in her movements. They had a majestic foundation, though they were far from being majestic; and they had a groundwork of assurance, but they were not assured" (186). In Hardy's fiction, characters and narrators share a sense that the groundwork is more essential and more valuable than the contingent, deceptive finish. A groundwork grounds, yet it is liable to disappear from view, unattended, and so it needs to be uncovered and reasserted if

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its function is to be clear. Early in *Jude the Obscure*, for example, as a young Jude arrives at the farmer Mr. Troutham's field, where he has been tasked with scaring away birds, the narrator describes a plot of land on which "fresh harrow-lines seemed to stretch like the channelings in a piece of new corduroy, lending a meanly utilitarian air to the expanse, taking away its gradations, and depriving it of all history beyond that of the few recent months." Despite the smoothing over of the marks of history by the working of the ground, the land remains saturated by a memory that has after all only been covered over and made invisible, as if to begin anew: "to every clod and stone," the narrator clarifies, "there really attached associations enough and to spare—echoes of songs from ancient harvest-days, of spoken words, and of sturdy deeds. . . . But this neither Jude nor the rooks around him considered. For them it was a lonely place, possessing in the one view only the quality of a work-ground, and in the other that of a granary good to feed in" (8). Here, the "work-ground" is literally the space of agricultural labor, but it is also a plot of land stripped of its redolent details—its markings—and made as new and unused as a fresh bolt of fabric, or perhaps a blank page. Having been worked over, it now seems to offer no purpose other than to be worked and worn again, to be marked with features and figures, to be shaped.

It seems, then, that uncovering the groundwork unsettles as much as it enlightens, whether we are talking about faces or about the landscapes that Hardy so often compares to faces.[1] In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), for example, in the scene in which Tess and her friend Marian work in a turnip field, we are told that, the livestock having eaten the leaves of the buried turnip bulbs,

> the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face from chin to brow should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other, all day long the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies. (304)

Hardy echoes his metaphor from seventeen years earlier, the "forms without features" of the moor besieged by snow having now become the "complexion without features," the turnip field stripped of its green shoots. To expose the groundwork is often to get at the truth, but Hardy insists that it is just as often to disorient—to flatten detail and texture so grotesquely that the expressive face becomes only a horrifyingly mute expanse of skin, across which skitter two flies. The syntax of the final sentence of this passage confuses even the location of Tess and Marian, who are said to crawl over the surface of "the former" of the two featureless expanses—but the chiasmus with which the two faces' mutual gaze is described makes it somewhat difficult to determine which is the former and which is the latter. Do they crawl across the brown field, as we assume they must? Or does nothing ground them any longer as the scene fades to near-colorlessness, so that they might crawl just as easily across that blank white ground, the sky?

The groundwork, then, is always a metaphor, or an approximation, in Hardy: the snow-filled scene retains some afterimage of the more detailed scene that has just been described for us, that we know remains hidden beneath the whiteout. The image of the featureless face is effective only because we sense its unnaturalness, the lack of features that should be there to restore to that "vacuity of countenance" its missing pieces, its relative above-or-below position in the scene. Indeed, Hardy often associates the landscape's loss of its features, its reduction to mere form, with a living process of decay, or desire, or breath, in which the obliteration of detail is bound to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be repeated, so that the process is never quite complete. Take, for example, the description of Egdon Heath that fills the first chapter of *The Return of the Native* and that is strikingly echoed in the turnip field of *Tess*. The heath, like the turnip field, is imagined in the chapter's title as a face, "A Face on Which Time Makes But Little Impression" (9), since the heath appears even darker than the night sky above it, as if out of joint with the rotation of the earth: "The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread" (9). Blacker than the blackest night sky, this landscape again threatens a topsy-turvy inversion of sky and land; it has its own rhythms, and according to those rhythms its own ways of hiding and revealing its details and textures that do not rely on the cycle of day and night.[2]

The moments in which the landscape becomes so dark as to be featureless in fact reveal rather than conceal the truest image of the heath:

> [N]obody could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at such a time. It could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen, its complete effect and explanation lying in this and the succeeding hours before the next dawn; then, and only then, did it tell its true tale. The spot was, indeed, a near relation of night, and when night showed itself an apparent tendency to gravitate together could be perceived in its shades and the scene. The somber stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced halfway. (9)

Total blackness offers the "complete effect and explanation" of the heath, and yet the narrator deprives us of the specific effect he means, the specific content of the heath's explanation, as he works by the kind of indirection that often accompanies the moments in Hardy where the groundwork shows through. The heath, moreover, "exhales" its darkness. Darkness does not lie on top of the heath like a cloak; rather, the heath in all its vivid and precise detail covers the black groundwork that lies underneath, which is periodically exhaled like a black fog that rises up to meet the sympathetic blackness of the night sky. The dissolution of detail is figured as an erotic longing in which dividing lines and contrasts fall away in favor of sheer undifferentiation.[3]

In the third chapter of *The Return of the Native*, we watch as the heath emerges from a disorienting, featureless blackness with the lighting of bonfires to commemorate Guy Fawkes Day. As we might expect, these lights reorient us and the characters who populate this landscape, but they also powerfully reinforce the organizing role of the groundwork, which we can no longer push into the back of our mind. Having been "nearly obliterated by shade" (19), a turn of phrase that recalls the "obliteration by snow" with which I began, the heath regains its features slowly and uncertainly, as if Hardy is searching for the metaphor that will embed those bright fires in the black ground out of which they emerge:

> None of its features could be seen now, but the whole made itself felt as a vague stretch of remoteness.
>
> While the men and lads were building the pile a change took place in the mass of shade which denoted the distant landscape. Red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round. They were the bonfires of other parishes and hamlets that were engaged in the same sort of commemoration. Some were distant, and stood in a dense atmosphere, so that bundles of pale straw-like beams radiated around them in the shape of a fan. Some were large and near, glowing scarlet-red from the shade,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> like wounds in a black hide. Some were Mænades, with winy faces and blown hair. These tinctured the silent bosom of the clouds above them and lit up their ephemeral caves, which seemed thenceforth to become scalding cauldrons. Perhaps as many as thirty bonfires could be counted within the whole bounds of the district; and as the hour may be told on a clockface when the figures themselves are invisible, so did the men recognize the locality of each fire by its angle and direction, though nothing of the scenery could be viewed. (19)

The blackness serves as a blank slate, allowing the fires that burst onto the scene to appear as varied images—fans, wounds, maenads, cauldrons—each presupposing a different kind of relation between feature and groundwork. The scene is a particularly complex example of what Scarry has called "radiant ignition," a technique by which the appearance of moving lights seeming to lift off from a dark ground aids us in our cognitive visualizations of the world being described to us—although in this case the lights that spring up remain embedded in their organizing field instead of taking flight (*Dreaming* 77; see 77–88). The fan and the maenad are images drawn on the heath; the wound, on the other hand, punctures the dark and reveals it as animal and fleshy; the cauldron is formed by the light reflected from ground and sky, radiating between the two featureless "faces" of the scene. Finally, the fires lighting the heath are compared to the hands of a clock without "figures," which point to relative positions on a blank field rather than to precisely marked numerical positions; although the field is blank, its circular form allows us to orient ourselves against its horizon, just as the edges of Rauschenberg's white canvases offer us some relief, some promise that the world will not be overwhelmed by blankness even as we tip perilously close to it.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy dedicates a full chapter to the excruciating journey of Fanny Robin, destitute, pregnant, and physically hobbled, her face "young in the groundwork, old in the finish," as she travels by foot to Casterbridge to seek refuge in a workhouse, her forward movement eventually having "dwindled to the merest totter." She cries out in despair, "If I could only get there!" In his painstaking description of the journey from here to there, Hardy also narrates the breakdown of Fanny's mechanisms of orientation as she moves ahead into a thoroughly blank landscape, "the depths of a moonless and starless night" (258). In turning to a reading of this chapter, I also turn to the pragmatic problem posed by what we might call the smoothness of the groundwork. Fanny tries to get from one place to another by putting one foot in front of the other, but how can she measure the length of a step in a world with no points of orientation, in the smooth and continuous black of night? Hardy draws on the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno's paradoxes of motion to question our capacity to divide the smooth groundwork into countable steps. He makes what has been a formal problem for the novelist's descriptive project into a detailed pragmatic problem for a character who tries to find her way.

Fanny first tries counting the chimes of a clock to measure how long she has been walking, to orient herself in time even if she cannot orient herself in space, and discerns only one chime. But she's uncertain: the clock sounds in a "small, attenuated tone," as if its chimes might have thinned out to the point of blurring together, so that what seems to Fanny like a single chime might in reality be many (258). Earlier in the novel, Bathsheba Everdene experiences the visual version of this phenomenon when the many gleams of light that appear in the sky after a rainstorm overlap in her perception, making for a dizzying disorientation: "The sky was now filled with an incessant light, frequent repetition melting into complete continuity as an unbroken sound results from successive strokes

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on a gong" (247). When a passing light from a carriage reveals to Fanny a milestone nearby, however, she finally feels she has encountered a real, countable interval in space—the distinct boundary between one mile and the next. She learns that she has two miles remaining in her journey to Casterbridge, and this knowledge buoys her spirits.

But, alas, she continues to lose her way (and her hope) between this milestone and the next. As if echoing and reconstituting the dissolving chimes of the clock, the bark of a fox sounds, "its three hollow notes being rendered at intervals of a minute with the precision of a funeral bell" (260). Energized by the distinctness of the fox's barks, Fanny remembers that she must walk only "[a] little over a mile, and there I am!" The hopeful exclamation—"there I am!"—collapses *here* into *there*, fantasizing about the destination in the present tense. Attempting to make this fantasy more concrete, and the orientation more precise, Fanny tries to calculate the number of steps that it will take to reach her destination: "Five or six steps to a yard—six perhaps. I have to go seventeen hundred yards. A hundred times six, six hundred. Seventeen times that. O pity me, Lord!" Since this kind of counting leads only to terror (or math anxiety), she fools herself with a different kind of counting, pretending that each fifth post of the fence that she follows represents the end of her destination: "I'll believe that the end lies five posts forward, and no further, and so get strength to pass them." The novel enters into a chanting repetition, a call-and-response between narrator and character: "She passed five more. 'It lies only five further.' She passed five more. 'But it is five further.' She passed them" (260). Fanny realizes that even after four five-post journeys, she has almost half a mile left, and the narrator describes her sinking feeling, the come down from the fantasy of the divisible to the horror of "the lump":

> Self-beguilement with what she had known all the time to be false had given her strength to come over half a mile that she would have been powerless to face in the lump. The artifice showed that the woman, by some mysterious intuition, had grasped the paradoxical truth that obtuseness may operate more vigorously than prescience, and the short sighted effect more than the far seeing: that limitation, and not comprehensiveness, is needed for striking a blow.
>
> The half-mile stood now before the sick and weary woman like a stolid Juggernaut. (261)

At the heart of this scene is a paradox. Only by hanging on to the obtuse fantasy of counting steps, counting posts, and counting chimes can Fanny overcome the stolid impossibility of getting there that ends up facing her like a juggernaut, blocking the view of Casterbridge that has beckoned to her in the distance. Fanny has managed thus far to avoid the "far seeing" insight that there is always a halfway point between here and there. Counting is comforting, but it is also in some sense unreal, a fiction about movement across space that makes it impossible to arrive at one's destination, since there will always be one more half interval left in the journey.

Fanny's journey performs a version of one of Zeno's paradoxes of motion, passed down to us secondhand in book 6 of Aristotle's *Physics*. The paradox insists that to get from here to there is always impossible so long as we imagine space to be divided into countable steps as we move along a line from point A to point B, since one can continue to divide each step into halfway points within halfway points ad infinitum. As Aristotle describes Zeno's argument, in order to move, one would need to do the impossible, "to pass over or severally to come in contact with infinite things [i.e., points in space] in a finite time" (233a 22–23). Aristotle's solution to Zeno's paradox is to insist that "while a thing in a finite time cannot come in contact with things quantitatively infinite," or with the actually infinite series of points that Zeno imagines, "it can come into contact with things infinite in respect of divis-

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ibility," or simply with a continuous line that could potentially be divided at any point (233a 25–28). And of course, that is the way we often want to imagine movement, walking, getting there: we take one step, then the next, putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again, "and there I am," since there is no other possible result of moving step-by-step, or even of feebly tottering. We feel ourselves pass smoothly and continuously through space, not jerkily through an infinite series of adjacent but separate points. In his commentary on Aristotle, Simplicius describes one famous response to Zeno's paradoxes of motion when he recounts that "Diogenes the Cynic, having heard these puzzles once, said nothing in reply to them, but stood up and walked" (114). But Zeno's paradox retains its force in Hardy, suggesting the terror of a world divisible everywhere. As Anne Carson puts it, describing the painful irresistibility of Zeno's paradoxes, "You love Zeno and you hate him. You know there is a ruse operating in his paradoxes, yet you keep going back over them . . . because you like trying to understand what kind of a thing a paradox is. You like being situated at that blind but lively point where your reason is viewing itself" (81–82). Grasping at milestones, hanging on to posts, and counting from one to five all provide Fanny with ways of anchoring and orienting herself in a world that threatens to dissolve into blackness, to lose its orienting features and become only smooth groundwork forever and ever; yet it is also such counting that leads her to fall irrevocably into paradox, to the horrifying realization that maybe it has all been only an illusory comfort, not a reality. Or, as Carson says, maybe that "blind but lively point," while terrifying, can represent a desirable surrender to stillness and incapacity—the point at which Fanny decides to give up and allow a dog, who appears to her out of the shadows as "a portion of shade" that "seemed to detach itself, and move into isolation," a feature appearing out of the featurelessness of the black night, to carry her the rest of the way to Casterbridge. Fanny reaches that point of surrender as she realizes that the last half mile remains not only a juggernaut but also "an impassive King of her world" (261). In that phrase, we also hear "impasse," the impasse by which one's movement forward is arrested, made suddenly impossible and uncountable, the subject of a profound aporia—the impasse that endures as long as we insist that space is made of countable units that divide the flat and continuous groundwork into parts.[4] Fanny finally does arrive at the door of the workhouse, but her arrival, described only secondhand by minor characters, and in hindsight, is followed immediately by her death. It is as if the narrator's representation of her journey—as an embodiment of Zeno's paradox—makes it impossible for the same voice to describe her arrival. For Fanny, and for Hardy as a novelist building the illusion of a spatially extended and complex world on a dark, blank groundwork, the act of counting intervals leads to the paradox of infinite steps that Zeno makes so irresistible. In the image of Fanny counting steps, Hardy conjures, if only obliquely, the field of existence that lies in the interstices between the smallest intervals—and in doing so, he makes this field of pure being that we see around the edges of the countable somehow ordinary, even tragically ordinary, an affair of hobbling steps and milestones and the sharp barking of a fox.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy describes another exhausting journey that, like Fanny Robin's, ends in death: Mrs. Yeobright's journey across Egdon Heath in intense heat to visit her future daughter-in-law, Eustacia Vye, in hopes of reconciling their differences. On this journey, the world of "infinitesimal matter" pervading the humid, puddled scene offers Mrs. Yeobright an emblem of forward-looking hope analogous to Fanny Robin's fence posts and milestones, allowing her to believe not only that she will reach her destination but that when she arrives all will work out for the best:

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> Occasionally she came to a spot where independent worlds of ephemerons were passing their time in mad carousal, some in the air, some on the hot ground and vegetation, some in the tepid and stringy water of a nearly-dried pool. All the shallower ponds had decreased to a vaporous mud, amid which the maggoty shapes of innumerable obscene creatures could be indistinctly seen, heaving and wallowing with enjoyment. Being a woman not disinclined to philosophize, she sometimes sat down under her umbrella to rest and to watch their happiness, for a certain hopefulness as to the result of her visit gave ease to her mind, and, between her important thoughts, left it free to dwell on any infinitesimal matter which caught her eyes. (266–67)

This tiny, "innumerable," "indistinctly seen" riot of shapes opens up for Mrs. Yeobright the interstitial places "between her important thoughts," and yet these little beings are not only a metaphor for the free play of the optimistic mind—they really exist, although they are sequestered, it seems, in "independent worlds," in an alternate dimension of tininess that often passes beneath our ordinary perception, a vaporous world under or alongside our own in which counting is futile or obsolete, or in which the illusion of counting has never been taken too seriously. This perhaps seems a type of groundwork different from the one I have been following—a realm teeming with microscopic beings rather than a blank canvas primed in white or black. And yet Mrs. Yeobright's sinking into the interstitial places of her thoughts and of the muddy earth, in which a different kind of life rises to the surface, recalls Egdon Heath as it exhales its darkness into the sky, or the turnip bulbs growing just underneath the brown surface of the earth, or the living history mixed up in the freshly plowed lines in Mr. Troutham's field. Mrs. Yeobright seems to sink into a world like the one in Zeno's paradox, which could be divided anywhere, at the most infinitesimal scales—but unlike Fanny, with her vertiginous response, her feeling of being unable to get from here to there, Mrs. Yeobright feels this paradox of scale as an unalloyed pleasure.

The groundwork of Hardy's fiction might be understood more broadly, then, as a problem of form and its operation at different scales and brightnesses and textures—in other words, a problem of our different kinds of attunement to the formal underpinnings (or the living, rioting underpinnings) of the spatial reality of the novel.[5] These two things—form and life, white canvas and infinitesimal biological matter—may not for Hardy be so different. Both are fields that invisibly permeate our own and that threaten us with existential disorientation when they are exhaled from under the surface or when the novelist tunes in to their white noise. Such disorientation can be awful (like Fanny Robin's suffering) but it can also be deeply pleasurable (like the luxurious blackness of Egdon Heath, or Mrs. Yeobright's burst of optimism).

For Lukács, the novel is best at representing the "world of distances . . . sprawling and chaotic" (59) and thus stands opposed to the ancient epic that precedes it historically, in which distinctions of *here* and *there* are meaningless (or at least unimportant), and his treatment of the spatial fields and scales of the novel can be helpful in understanding Hardy's ambivalent relation to his novelistic groundwork. As Lukács puts it when describing the world of epic, "there exist no qualitative differences which are insurmountable, which cannot be bridged except by a leap"; rather, "the ascent to the highest point, as also the descent to the point of utter meaninglessness, is made along the paths of adequation, that is to say, at worst, by means of a long, graduated succession of steps with many transitions from one to the next" (32). In the epic, even "at worst," steps are easy, a "graduated succession" that requires no impossible leaps: in a certain sense, it is all

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

here, never *there*. Lukács describes not only a form without features but a space without distances, relations without differences—something like that infinitesimal singularity that preceded the big bang, in which nothing had yet separated from anything else. And yet there it all is. This idealization of the epic is how Lukács arrives, finally, at that strange phrase, "the paths of adequation," paths that lead from here to here, from myself to myself, that connect equivalences instead of bridging gaps or negotiating differences; or perhaps these are the sturdy paths of unbroken connectedness that allow the novel to remain adequate to its task, adequate to the totality in which gaps between the world of fiction and its groundwork no longer exist.

All this is to say that in Lukács's utopian concept of the ancient world and the epic narrative that reflects its prelapsarian reality, counting steps is unimaginable, because counting steps presupposes a way of dividing the world and measuring its distances in discrete units. Lukács instead imagines a world in which all movements, whether upward or downward, proceed by a smooth continuity—floating rather than stepping, gliding rather than counting. The image of the step persists even in Lukács's account, however, each one connected by "many transitions." Lukács clearly shares with Hardy an interest in Zeno's paradox and a sense of its importance to how we understand the fictional representation of reality. After all, the object of Zeno's critique, the idea that we proceed across distances "step by step," is always only a fiction. In other words, we know that motion must be much more continuous than that but find it difficult to show what such absolute continuity, without intervals and without steps, looks and feels like. The fiction of step-by-step movement might then also be the basis of fictional realism, which must begin from a countable interval to build a world on the groundwork.

Strangely, given the ancient pedigree of Zeno's paradox, Lukács insists that the ancient epic represents a world in which this paradox is irrelevant, a world in which each step from here to there is continuous rather than divisible—made up of many transitions, not the infinite points on which Zeno would insist. Even here, the groundwork remains a very near approximation. In this essay, my claim has been that Hardy's fiction often reaches for a kind of immanence different from the one Lukács is after, the one he called the "immanence of meaning in life" and designated as the central problem of the novel—its missing but longed-for end. In Hardy's novels, we find such immanence of meaning not in Lukács's concept of the lost "extensive totality," in which all is *here*, nothing ever *there* (56). Rather, for Hardy, the "far sight" that helps us see past the place where counting ends is a gaze deep into a muddy puddle, the perception enabled by the close rather than the comprehensive gaze. Hardy once wrote that "the Art of novel-writing" is predicated on "an observative responsiveness to everything within the cycle of the suns that has to do with actual life," and yet the "everything" to which the novelist must respond is surprisingly focused and flattened out for Hardy, used here as a way to describe the novelist's "blindness to material particulars" in favor of "a sensitiveness to the intrinsic," or to the smooth, blank field in which those particulars take shape ("Science" 263). Counting steps in Hardy's novels is a rudimentary kind of denotation—relativistic, rooted in the individual body as it marks its position in space, the length of its own legs, the strength of its forward momentum—a denotation not of things but of points in space and time. If denotation can also mean the orientation of the body in space, then it can in fact point us beyond the numerable and toward some more indistinct, more attenuated field that is nevertheless achingly, forbiddingly real.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. Miller reads the face and the landscape in *The Return of the Native* as connected through catachresis (*Topographies* 9–56). I diverge from Miller's deconstructive idea that we can never find the ground subtending Hardy's landscapes. Instead, we need to change our sense of what ground we seek: not a set of "determining causes," in Miller's terms (21), but rather a field that is by definition without a precise position, that does not cause—but makes space for—the world that takes shape in it. Miller revisits and refines this reading in *Communities in Fiction* (93–138). In Cohen's reading of *The Return of the Native*, the face is "a screen onto which thoughts and feelings are projected" and "a physiological receptacle for sensory encounters with the world" (88). While Cohen is concerned with problems of characterization, and with the human body's sensory relation to the landscape, I share his sense that "[f]or Hardy, . . . the face is a tissue of interwoven strata" (91), built in layers that both register and resist the straightforward relation between background and foreground, or between groundwork and finish.

2. Gibson reads Hardy's interest in the obscurity of nighttime differently, focusing on his "lit-window scenes" as "lyric interpolations in his novels' love plots" (162).

3. Cohn reads scenes like this one as emblematic of Hardy's interest in portraying "a world without human autonomy, individuality, or agency" (153). Cohn argues that in describing Egdon Heath Hardy "evokes a diminished awareness, and in-between existence, that refuses the pressures of self-reflection without invoking individual interiority. The most extraordinary features of the heath are at once super-perceptible and unperceived" (157). Although I am less interested than Cohn in the implications of this scene for questions of autonomy or agency, I follow her in emphasizing the "in-between existence" that Hardy's groundwork invokes.

4. Kolb discusses another way in which getting anywhere on foot becomes impossible in Hardy—when one moves in a circle and ends up where one began.

5. For alternative readings of the problem of scale in Hardy, more attuned to ecology, climate, and the immensity of deep time, see Morgan; Rosenberg.

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