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It is a commonplace in criticism to see irony and coincidence as pervading features of Thomas Hardy's novels. Fate, circumstance, and disillusionment in the face of life's ironies are embedded in his narratives. The same can be said about Beryl Bainbridge's novels, and it is surprising that this similarity in philosophical vision and mode of narration has never been noted in the attempts made to place Bainbridge in the English literary tradition. Although different in style, Hardy and Bainbridge convey the same sense of determinism and frustration of expectations as well as sympathy with human shortcomings and the resilience of the individual at the mercy of impersonal forces.

It is easy to understand that two writers who appear to be so preoccupied with the possibility that lives are shaped by other factors than rationality, control and freedom, repeatedly using this idea as narrative employment, should be intrigued by an historical event that seems to epitomise the reality of coincidence and irony. In April 1912, the "unsinkable" Titanic struck an iceberg and went down with 1,500 people. Hardy was quick to respond to the event by writing "The Convergence of the Twain: Lines on the Loss of the Titanic". The poem was first printed in the programme of a charity concert in aid of the Titanic Disaster Fund given at Covent Garden on May 14, 1912. In November of the same year Hardy's first wife died, and, by coincidence, Captain Scott and his crew met their deaths in cold and ice in a doomed attempt to conquer the South Pole. From a later vantage-point, Beryl Bainbridge saw the failure of the Scott expedition and the Titanic disaster of 1912 as events marking the end of an era and as omens of World War I, and turned them into novels: The Birthday Boys (1991), and Every Man for Himself (1996). As we know, Hardy too was prepared to see events in a wider context, as exemplified by the epic drama The Dynasts (1904–1908), in which the Napoleonic war is played out as a human drama in a cosmological setting, featuring, amongst others, "the Immanent Will", which also finds a place in his Titanic poem.

But, more to the point, already in his last novel, Jude the Obscure (1895), as Ariela Freedman argues, Hardy "foresees the decay of modernity at its very inception" (6) and she further sees the inevitability of Jude's fate as an attempt to "chart an already doomed modernity" (3). For Hardy and Bainbridge the Titanic is a fitting metaphor of the Western world headed for disaster on the "unsink-
able" ship of innocence (a number of reviews of Bainbridge's novel refer to it as a "Ship of Fools") in a way that resembles Nietzsche's observation of the shortcomings of modernity, namely that "science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly towards its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck" (97). The "Loss of the Titanic" is symptomatic of a loss of faith in progress, or as Hardy was to write seven years later: "I should care more for my birthdays if at each succeeding one I could see any sign of real improvement in the world - as at one time I fondly hoped there was: but I fear are represented as discrete categories but also as inescapably interrelated and the same way as a question requires an answer for completion, but such fulfillment is deferred and frustrated in the lack of rational purpose and meaning of "the intimate welding" (27) in this "one august event" (30).

Coincidence alone, however, is seldom the point of Hardy's writings. The dire consequences of converging trajectories are usually the result of coincidence and flaws of character combined. In this poem Hardy indirectly plays on the concepts of probability/possibility by suggesting that the collision was highly improbable - "no mortal eye could see", "no sign" - although the true situation was that icebergs were an expected and real threat, and that the sinking of the "unsinkable" was not only held to be improbable at the time, but virtually impossible. The tragic irony lies not in the "convergence" as an event but in its unexpected and improbable result. Along with the loss of faith in progress, a loss of faith in the cultural values that produced the Titanic is implied. The synecdochic details of the ship and the adjectives chosen to define her also define the superficial and arrogantly proud culture that created her: "steel chambers"; "opulent"; "Jewels in joy designed / to ravish the sensuous mind; "gilded gear"; "cleaving wing"; "gaily great". If there is belief in determination, it is linked to the belief that "human vanity" and "vaingloriousness" are bound to bring their own doom.

More significantly, there is a suggestion of loss of faith in love, or its possibility. As Lennart Björk has pointed out, love is the main theme of Hardy's writing (24), and he quotes J. Hillis Miller's observation that "Love is Hardy's obsessive theme both in his fiction and in his verse" as well as John Bayley's claim that "his favourite topic is 'an incongruous love-situation in a particular setting'" (24). In this poem the tragic sinking is certainly the result of "an incongruous love-situation in a particular setting", a metaphor of a chance love-meeting doomed to be destructive. The result of the meeting is death, not new life. It is, to borrow the words of Nietzsche's book title, "the birth of tragedy". What is more, the poem of the proud ship's encounter with the iceberg on her maiden voyage seems to repeat the fate of the maiden Tess on her journey towards death. When "consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres" in the last line, the violence implied in 'jarring' suggests incompatibility ("Alien they seemed to be" [25]) and a negation of the possibility of unity, echoing a passage from Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891): "Enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of that whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment" (Tess 54). The poem's "Now! And each one hears" in the penultimate line is even an ironic reversal of the narrational lament in Tess: "Nature does not often say 'Seek' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply 'Here!' to a body's cry of 'Where?'" (Tess 53). The poem's "Now!" marks the moment of death and the end of the desire for unity or something lost.

We can safely assume that the likeness between the two trajectories (i.e. the meeting of Alec and Tess, and the iceberg and the ship), although fundamentally different, must have struck Hardy, especially in view of the fact that, only a few weeks before the Titanic disaster, he wrote a prefatory note to the 1912 edition of Tess. The sexual evocations of the long last lines of all the stanzas and their progress from "stilly courches she" to the final "consummation" not only join sexuality and death in a Freudian fashion, as does Bainbridge's novel; they also directly call up associations to the scene of the sleeping Tess and her seduction. The poem's repetition of the previous fiction in the artistic rendering of a historical event makes life and art converge, and exemplifies Hillis Miller's argument in Fiction and Repetition that repetition is an "immanent design" (121) of Hardy's writing and his way of giving artistic form to the immanence of life. Likewise, Bainbridge uses strategies of repetition in her fiction to depict a similar vision of life. Morgan's growing belief in Every Man for Himself, for instance, that he is
“destined to be a participant rather than a spectator of singular events” (15) is a variation on the remark in Bainbridge’s _An Awfully Big Adventure_ (which shares many significant features with her Titanic novel) that “Life has a nasty habit of repeating itself” (153).

In a similar vein, Freedman argues that Hardy’s “recursive structure” (14) heralds the death-plot of twentieth-century fiction and the “uncanny” as being “most powerful as a force of immanence” (15). Freedman claims that Freud’s theory of repetition and trauma “depicts modernity as an endgame, and rejects positivist and evolutionary accounts of human development in favor of the fatalist and devolutionary death-plot” (6). She sees Hardy and the modernist novelists as dramatizing this view. Also Björk emphasizes Hardy’s scepticism of optimistic belief in humankind’s evolutionary development (49). In opposition to Peter Brooks’s understanding of repetition as a means of making meaning, Freedman points out that in Freud “repetition is often an experience of passivity”, and that Brooks’s view is incompatible with “the Freud who claims he comes with no words of consolation, no magic bullet, no therapeutic end” (8). “Repetition”, Freedman concludes, “provides a way to portray movement without progress” (39).

The structure of Hardy’s poem constitutes an example of this and is reminiscent of Bainbridge’s favourite structure of circular composition in which the beginning is also the end. The eternal present of the opening, “stillly couches she”, also “jars” with the historical present of the last stanza’s “Now”, which is in the poem’s past, thus making past and present “converge”. Bainbridge makes a similar gesture towards the historical past by first letting Morgan think he hears fragments of authentic conversations as reported by survivors, then including the full sentences in the narrative at a later time, mixing narrative past, present, and future and art and life.

Hardy and Bainbridge also favour the kind of repetitions in the form of clusters of textual or narrative elements that Hillis Miller discusses in _Fiction and Repetition_. In _Every Man for Himself_ such a cluster is, for instance, formed by the frequent repetitions of ‘dog’, which Morgan unaccountably dislikes, ‘cord’ (or ‘rope’), and the portrait of the mother Morgan never knew, painted before he was born, which he steals from his uncle’s house before embarking on his journey. Tucking it into his jacket, he thinks that she had never been “closer to my heart” (19), “looks for likeness” (25) but finds none, and hangs it on the cabin wall in the hope that “she would watch over” him, which is not the case: “Absent to the last, I thought …” (40). In textbook Freudian style the three images are condensed and displaced until the moment of the primal scene, when Morgan becomes an involuntary voyeur of the violent love-making between the stand-offish girl he pursues and Scurr, his father-figure, in which the cord of Morgan’s dressing-gown is used to tie Wallis to the bed, while she says “I want to die” (152). Soon after, Morgan creeps out of the closet “on all four like an animal, nose sniffing the unnatural odour that stung the air” (152). At this point repressed memories of his mother emerge and he wants to throw the portrait into the ocean as it dawns on him that it was she “who had bound my wrists with string and tied me to the iron bolt of those half-closed shutters overlooking that stinking worm of water” (153). Nevertheless, he puts it in his pocket before the ship goes down, but there is no unity, only separation. Among the debris floating on the water at the very end is “a creased square of canvas with a girl’s face painted on it” (224), signifying the loss, or entropy, of representational meaning.

The result of movement in both Hardy and Bainbridge is regression, a repetition of the past and a return to origin, irreversibly pointing to future death. In Hardy’s case, Freedman argues that his works come close to Freud’s notion of entropy (21). Although Freud never used the term, he clearly draws on the natural sciences to develop his theory of the death drive, Thanatos, and its relation to Eros. The term entropy refers to the way matter and energy inevitably tend towards an inert state according to the Second Law of thermodynamics, or equilibrium thermodynamics. This understanding of entropy was the dominant paradigm in physics as well as culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century (Rosenberg 2). Entropy is associated with disorder, descent, randomness, dissolution and equilibrium, and also refers to the irreparable deterioration of any system or society (www.Dictionary.com). The first two stanzas of Hardy’s poem provide a perfect illustration of entropy as an end-game, a return to inanimate origin, and the erasure of thermal differences in the diffusion of heat and cold, or as Ilya Prigogine describes the process, “a final state of thermal equilibrium, ‘heat death’” (qtd in Rosenberg 11):

> In a solitude of the sea  
> Deep from human vanity,  
> And the Pride of Life that planned her, stillly couches she.

> Steel chambers, late the pyres  
> of her salamandrine fires,  
> Cold currents thrird, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

The connection between _Eros_ and _Thanatos_ is clear: the creative drives of culture and humans are equally fatal, but the choice of the modifier “salamandrine” of the ship’s fires below the water-line (the dynamic unconscious) suggests resilience and resistance (albeit futile) to extinction. In Bainbridge’s novel the potential destructiveness of repressed drives is captured not only in the Freudian-inspired treatment of characters, but also in metaphorical references to the suppression of “the fire blazing in the stokehold of Number 10 bunker” (52), exposing the steel plates to heat, thus likely to weaken them (90-91, 217), in other words, thermodynamic diffusion. The ship as a metaphor of a hermetically sealed (cf. Hardy’s “steel chambers” in line 4) old world order is torn apart and the debris (or waste in thermodynamic terms) “caught upon the water — chairs and tables, crates, an empty gin bottle, a set of bagpipes” (224) signifies its disorder and dissolution.
Bainbridge also makes an ironic and direct allusion to thermodynamics, or a misdirected faith in a stable order of the universe:

We had spent our lives in splendid houses and grand hotels and for us there was nothing new under the sun, nothing that is, in the way of opulence; it was the sublime thermodynamics of the Titanic's marine engineering that took us by the throat. Dazzled, I was thinking that if the fate of man was connected to the order of the universe, and if one could equate the scientific workings of the engines with just such a reciprocal universe, why then, nothing could go wrong with my world. (36)

If anything, as the novel indicates, it is the possibility of such a correspondence between the universe, science, and human fate that makes things "go wrong" since there is no stable order, only probabilities. For the Second Law of thermodynamics, as Rosenberg points out, "forces observers to recognize the roles that randomness and the irreversibility of time play in physical processes. The state of any system is perpetually contingent until it arrives at its rest state or equilibrium" (9). At the end of Every Man for Himself "heat death", thermodynamic equilibrium, is complete in the ironic inversion of nature and culture as ice takes on the mock shape of a "pale fleet" of the past: "Dawn came and as far as the eye could see the ocean was dotted with islands and fields of ice. Some floated with tapering mast-heads, some sailed with monstrous bows rising sheer to the pink-flushed sky, some glided the water in the shapes of ancient vessels" (224).

Although a survivor, Morgan, like Tess and Jude, lacks control of himself and events, and is haunted by a past that cannot be repeated, or retrieved, despite his longing to restore a connection with his dead mother and unknown father. He also shares Tess's and Jude's face of uncertain identity and belonging in the social structure, "the cuckoo in [his cousin's] nest" (13). As in Hardy's works, then, absence, loss, and the frustration of desire are central themes in Bainbridge's novels. The emphasis on loss and absence is not only evident in Morgan's pre-occupation with his uncertain past, but also in the number of deaths he has witnessed in his short life, the frequent loss of objects, and the loss of love, all of which precede the actual disaster. The effect is that absence and loss stand out as immanent features of life, and the sinking of the ship as integral to it rather than as an anomaly. Listening to an aria from Madame Butterfly sung by Adèle, a fellow-passenger, describing Cio-Cio-San's (and Adèle's) futile but persistent waiting for the absent lover, Morgan is struck, "suddenly and dreadfully," by a realization of "how cruelly she had been kept waiting, for hope springs eternal, as they say, even though the one who waits, be it a woman on a hillside or a child [Morgan] swinging its legs on an orphanage bench, already divines that the mandate of heaven is lost and the waiting must go on forever" (131–32). When Adèle, on her part, discovers that "the finger stroke of love" is lost forever (12, 43, 133) she is as "ready" to die as Tess is.

Through their relentless and repetitive emphasis on death, loss, and absence, it is clear that Hardy and Bainbridge share a vision of life that corresponds to entropy in Freudian as well as thermodynamic terms, thus giving artistic form to experience and discourses. At the same time both evoke images that point towards a resistance to the finality of entropy. The second stanza of Hardy's poem, for instance, while presenting a situation of disorder, of things in the 'wrong place', suggests the possibility of a different order as the "cold currents" (nature) turn the "steel chambers" (culture) into a harmonious instrument, "rhythmic tidal lyres". This vision is consistent with the more current non-equilibrium thermodynamics, which holds that entropy is not the final state, but has come "to be understood as an initial condition enabling greater order and complexity in a physical system" (Rosenberg 2). Rosenberg argues that this is the version of thermodynamics that Deleuze and Guattari (unlike Freud) draw on in their efforts to make the processes of culture and subjectivity intelligible (2, 14–19).

In Bainbridge's novel it makes sense to see Morgan's subjective processes in terms of Freudian libido, death drive, survival and sublimation, but in terms of culture Bainbridge decidedly introduces a non-equilibrium thermodynamic force of resistance in the form of the mysterious and amoral Scurra. In Deleuzian vocabulary he is a 'nomad', in constant movement and with no fixed identity or belonging. In rhizomic fashion he appears "out of nowhere" (134), has apparently no cabin, and responds to others by becoming whatever their desires require, while constantly challenging assumptions, values, and hierarchies: "What does it matter what anyone thinks?" (79) and denying paternity. He is connected to all the main characters who all confide in him, but no one knows him. Like a rhizome, he has "no beginning or end; [he] is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction 'and ... and ... and ...' (Deleuze and Guattari 25). He rejects all categorizations, refuses to be called Mr since "it erects barriers" (37), and has no patience with the social difference structured through the upper and lower decks of the ship. His occupation is anybody's guess - "he could be any one of a number of things" (142) - as is the cause of his scarred lip, the account of which varies according to the needs of his listener. He is not the "lyre" of Hardy's poem (although Deleuze and Guattari cite music as an example of the rhizomic), but he sings the tune of postmodernity: difference, plurality, and resistance to cultural norms in favour of pleasure, passion, and defiance of death. "My word, life is a tragedy, what?" (19), but "We have but a short time to please the living," he said. 'And all eternity to love the dead'" (154). So, "Save yourself if you can" (7). Like Bainbridge, Hardy does not offer any constructive or coherent criticism of society, only, as Björk concludes in his Psychological Vision and Social Criticism in the Novels of Thomas Hardy, a notion of the need for something different:

The narrator in Tess of the d'Urbervilles expresses a faint hope of a "closer interaction of the social machinery than that which now jolts us round and along" (49). And Jude's confession may in this context be seen as Hardy's own: "I am in a chaos
of principles – groping in the dark – acting by instinct and not after example …
I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas: what it is can only be discovered by men and women with greater insight than mine, – if indeed they ever discover it – at least in our time” (394). (141-42)

In a different time, Hardy, who, as Björk has shown, leaned more towards emotion and passion than intellect and rationality, and opposed the regime of social laws, might have found Scurra, non-equilibrium thermodynamics, and postmodernity liberating.

Works cited


