
Hardy and Mishima in the Context of Liminality: A Comparative Reading

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Abstract:

*This paper essays the task of reading two different fictional universes, here represented by Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Yukio Mishima's "The Swaddling Clothes," through the lenses of liminality. Adjusted to the present reading is the concept of chronotope as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. These are to be framed by the generic philosophico-historical notion of the axial age as propounded by Karl Jaspers. In the fictions under scrutiny focus will be geared towards the threshold experiences of two female liminal characters. The chronotope of female neophyte (stranger) here branches out into other sub-categories of chronoptic designations as seen fit with the schema of this study. The texts selected present varied historico-cultural perspectives apropos of the liminal experiences and performances of their agents, and proffer parallel narrative renditions of liminality.*

Key words: liminality, chronotope, threshold, axial age, female liminoids, chora.

INTRODUCTION

Though set a world apart from one another, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Yukio Mishima's "The Swaddling

Clothes” are fully present to the workings of the threshold aesthetic that dominates their thematic strings. They are approached here as fictions so replete with the topos of the liminal experience and its spatial tropes and chronoptics, beside the different nuances of the ache of being modern they both thematize. What is more, these stories have for their main agents what Victor W. Turner calls “liminal personae” or “threshold people” that are best represented here in the characters of the female “neophytes or initiands” (1977, 95), or even liminoids¹, that preside over the fictional universes of the narratives in hand.

The concept of a liminal situation can be applied to entire communities that are going through a crisis or overwhelmed with disorderliness. Karl Jaspers introduces the concept of the "axial period" or age to designate an interregnum that intermediates between two structured worldviews, where “[t]he unquestioned grasp on life is loosened, [and] the calm of polarities becomes the disquiet of opposites and antinomies” (1953, 3)². It is essentially a time of incertitude which involves entire civilizations as well as individual beings. This is how Jaspers further characterizes what he calls the axial period:

What is new about this age ... is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. *He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness.* He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence. (1953, 2; italics mine)

The notion of the axial age as such highlights an awareness of the present by placing it within the framework of the long gnostic prehistory and the boundless realm of possibilities which lie within the undecided future. Furthermore, it serves as a designation of the modernist paradigm as a whole. Intricately, Jaspers’ notion concurs with Turner’s theorizing

about liminality. It is under the tutelage of theorists like Turner, liminality comes to describe the transitory stage characteristic of rites of passage in various cultures. The troubled existence of the axial-age man as characterized by Jaspers is addressed more squarely in Turner's theorizing about the liminal period and the state of its entities. "Liminal entities," he posits, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (1977, 59). Turner's liminality further concurs with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, which is the revealing of meaning and significance of human actions through scrutinizing the temporal-spatial nexus.³ In approaching Hardy's and Mishima's fictions, this theoretical frame translates into the amalgamation of the liminal and the chronoptic modalities, appropriated here to account for the text's strategies of negotiating their meanings. In the argument yet to come, it is disseminated that Both Hardy and Mishima are habitués of the "*limen*" (threshold) (Turner 1977, 94), and their consecutive fictions are so devised that they reflect those writers' liminal consciousness.

IN THE "FOREST OF MONOLITHS": HARDY'S LIMEN

Deemed Hardy's *tour de force*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* not only does serve as an elaboration of the novelist's irresolute subject-position and ideas being persistently novelized, but it also comes burdened with the transitional poetics of the English *fin de siècle*. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* he novelizes the sense of liminality, or what he terms "the ache of modernism" (140; hereafter *Tess*), in terms of time, space and belief. This triad of thoughts/experiences is to be depicted in such a way that it forms one of the basic chronoptic knots in the novel.

The Hardy-esque chronotope of threshold in his *Tess* is laden with the notion of transition between the poles of Victorianism and modernism, and Christianity and paganism.

This chronotope, to consult Bakhtin, is related to “crisis and break” and to the “falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies that determine the whole life of a man” (1981, 428). This state of in-betweenness, of being in the threshold, is inextricably linked with the heavy shades of agnosticism in the work. Hardy’s transitional sensibility and poetics are further accounted for by Michael Wheeler who remarks that

Hardy’s darkening vision of universal pain and alienation, his sense of a fragmenting society and his portrayal of women, ... all suggest that a discussion of *Tess* and *Jude* makes a fitting coda to a study of English fiction of the period, as these novels point forward to twentieth-century themes. (1994, 211–12)

As a common apprehension and gloom in the late Victorian era, the ache—or rather the awe—of modernism was in the very air, typifying that historical axial period, and stamping it with the uncanniness and grotesquerie of being. This anxiety might be found well reverberated in *Tess* in these gloom-ridden words: “Some people might have cried ‘Alas, poor Theology!’ at the hideous defacement—the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time” (*Tess* 91). Such narratorial comments in the text shed light on the agnostic sensibility that informs Tess’s world.

The episode in which Hardy’s catch-phrase the *ache of modernism* and its connotative shades first manifest might prove central to the liminal experience in the novel as a whole. This ache and premature world-weariness are extracted when Tess responds to Angel’s inquisitions about her fear:

“What makes you draw off in that way, Tess,” said he. “Are you afraid?”

“Oh no, sir ... not of outdoor things, especially just now, when the apple-blooth is falling, and everything so green.”

“But you have your indoor fears—eh?”

“Well—yes, sir.”

“What of?”

“I couldn’t quite say.”

“The milk turning sour?”

“No.”

“Life in general?”

“Yes sir.”

“Ah—so have I, very often. This hobble of being alive is rather serious, don’t you think so?” (*Tess*139)

It seems here that Tess’s agrarian world, which might be accounted for by the idyllic chronotope where spatial placidity and timelessness are central facets, is stirred by the ache of liminality. Tess’s fear here is caused not by her “milk turning sour,” but by “[l]ife in general,” which is a modernist sensibility brought about by the awareness of the seriousness of “being alive.” The fears that “haunt Tess ... seem closer ... [to those] of the modern existentialist than to the sunlit ‘culture’ of high Victorian rationalism” (de Laura 1967, 396). Her liminal experience of time and death might thus be conceived in terms of the chronotope of the threshold, where the presages of the destruction of the idyllic chronotope are felt in the very placid pastoral world she inhabits; the following words of hers seem to be infused with the modern sense of the sublime:

The trees have inquisitive eyes, haven’t they?—that is, seem as if they had. And the river says “Why don’t ye trouble me with your looks?” And you seem to see numbers of to-morrows just all in a line, the first of them the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand further away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said, “I’m coming! Beware of me!” (*Tess* 139–40)

The way Tess conceives of time surprises Angel. Such advanced “sad imaginings” (*Tess* 140) and feelings are deemed by him as being characteristic of “the age—the ache of modernism” (*Tess* 140). Tess often seems to be uttering something momentous which she does not quite understand, much less explain, while Hardy tends to mould it in more learned philosophic jargon. It is so typical of Hardy’s narration and ideation to be conveyed in

two different registers—in the native Wessex phrasing as this comes naturally on the lips of Tess, and in “a more accurate expression, by words in *logy* and *ism*, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries” (*Tess* 140). This is how Tess is meant to express her pseudo-pagan sensibility and sublimity through the venue of the wavering Victorian Christianity, and Hardy intends to permeate his novel with that liminal discourse. Chief amongst his attempts to do so is by him having recourse to episodes in Britain’s history when heathenism was prevalent.

The Stonehenge episode has to do with the liminal agnostic experience in the novel. This episode comes as a climax, endorsing the liminal perspective of time as that which undoes the linear stretches of temporality and its pivotal posts of pastness, present, and futurity. In this very “forest of monoliths,” in this “monstrous place” (*Tess* 415), Tess hears those immemorial hums. She no longer cherishes the idea of meeting the face “representing in hieroglyphic the centuries of her family’s and England’s history” (*Tess* 45), as she is now caught in what goes far beyond the D’Urbervilles historical time. This perspective has already been enhanced by the novel’s spatial delineations that signify her liminal dislodgment, “[n]ot quite sure of her direction Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flames, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly” (*Tess* 120–21). She is stuck in an ahistorical *medias res* that bespeaks her axial present moment. Tess’s story culminates with her dramatic capture at Stonehenge. Hardy’s narrative here echoes the gnostic prehistoric hues, and the time scale moves beyond the human frontier. R. Robinson notes how “even more diminishing than the physical setting, is the large-scale chronological background against which Hardy increasingly made his figures move” (1980, 131). The ache of modernism as such paradoxically tallies with the chronoptics of paganism in the novel. Paganism

in *Tess* is presented as more comely than Christianity. Yet, it is a kind of a pilgrim's regress for Tess who is being torn between the Victorian code of ethics and the modern ethos. It is quite symbolic that her capture occurred at Stonehenge, which is a remnant of the old pagan world, and a liminal space *par excellence*. It is at Stonehenge that Tess's latent pagan legacy is given a resonant voice as it is associated with her mother's, "[o]ne of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home" (*Tess* 416). Shirley A. Stave remarks, "Hardy aligns Paganism with matriarchy by emphasizing Tess' [sic] bond with Joan" (*Tess* 196). Tess's abode or "receptacle" might be deemed to be "nourishing and maternal" despite the fact that it is "deprived of unity, identity, or deity" (Kristeva 1984, 26). She is finally glad as never before, as she is now free in this pseudo-transcendental and post-liminal timeless moment, and as she is ready to be sacrificed. Hardy's consciousness of the limen has been shown as seeping into Tess's modern chora⁴—i.e., her countryside being conceived as a third space—that, in turn, perplexes the Victorian mimesis. This consciousness of the limen and its chronoptics is to be further examined vis-à-vis the modernist mimesis proper.

IN THE FOREST OF SYMBOLS: MISHIMA'S LIMEN

The selfsame sense of being exposed to, and sacrificed on, the altar of liminality is found resonantly echoed in Mishima's "The Swaddling Clothes," a mid-twentieth-century story that dwells upon the axial-liminal paradigm and the ache-of-modernism thematics that—as is the case with the *Tess* narrative—wells up in the writer's visceral as well as intellectual sense of the personal and cultural liminality. Here, being in the threshold and being lost in *the forest of symbols*⁵ and the rites of passage are the basic manifestations of the liminal experience, among others.

All throughout his career, Mishima takes to documenting the common awe of living in a degenerate, postlapsarian age. He “profile[s] a country and a people in agonizing turmoil that still seeks for some outside escape” (Goodman 1992, 926), hence his characterization of the postwar Japan as a wasteland. The Mishima aesthetic explores the waning status of beauty, purity, tradition, virtue, and spiritual satisfaction in a rapidly modernizing Japan, and nihilistically looks towards death and destruction, in default of the orthodox sense of transcendence.

In his writing, Mishima builds up a strong narrative only to dismantle it and reveal its insubstantial fabric through doubt on the part of the narrative subject, a doubt that becomes in turn the basis for a renewed conviction—this could be dubbed as a mediocre modernist sense of sublimity. As characteristic of a good part of his opus, it is the woman who unravels the threads of his narrative. In the “Swaddling Clothes,” the symbolic act of Toshiko’s stream of consciousness is registering the author’s consciousness, and thus allegorizing the Japanese experience and consciousness in the aftermath of the Second World War. Early on in the narrative intimations are given of Toshiko’s “delicacy of spirit” (181; hereafter SC) and oversensitiveness which are symptoms of her being stuck in a certain rite of passage in/with which she has only a “casual acquaintance” (SC 181). She even feels quite estranged from her husband, who, being an actor enjoying role-playing, could be everybody else but never himself. He enjoys playing the role of the liminoid *par excellence* as he has been finally de-Japanized like most of the others in the postwar times.

When the story’s rising action initiates, the reader is introduced to Toshiko’s reaction to her husband’s grotesque account of their nurse’s giving birth in their place. In keeping with the story’s symbolic action, this incident might be seen in terms of the uncanny liminal space created within the narrative; the nurse’s newborn wrapped in a bloodstained newspaper stands for the version of Japan born out of the war

also wrapped in a bloodstained newspapers. On the other hand, Toshiko's well-looked-for baby represents the version of the welfare community that has been stepping forward in the westernizing process. In the story, these two versions become the domineering facets of Toshiko's axial-liminal consciousness. Henceforward, the narrative is rendered into Toshiko's consciousness, as "she looked more like a transparent picture than a creature of flesh and blood" (SC 181). This consciousness is now passing through a rite of passage, through a certain purgatory. To map out Toshiko's journey in her liminal purgatory it is apt to assume that from the moment she leaves her husband the process of her individuation is already begun. This individuation is characterized with a withdrawal from normal modes of socialization, epitomized by the breakdown of the persona. This breakdown situates her within the "pre-symbolic" typology of the chora that, to consult Julia Kristeva, "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (1984, 27, 26). All throughout her passage, Toshiko's consciousness tries to depict and then reconcile the facets of her shattered persona—the wretchedness symbolized by the nurse's baby, and the well-being symbolized by her own baby. This symbolic order is rather disturbed and is re-rendered in terms of the semiotics of the maternal body. The whole scenery is going to form the receptacle of this body's consciousness. The typology of Toshiko's passage is so telling of the liminal-purgatorial experience and space, as is delicately shown in the narrative:

The taxi drove off, passed down a street dotted with bars and then by a theatre, in front of which the throngs of people jostled each other on the pavement. Although the performance had only just ended, the lights had already been turned out and in the half dark outside it was depressingly obvious that the cherry blossoms decorating the front of the theatre were merely scraps of white paper. (SC 183)

The scene of the throngs of people jostling each other on the pavement is a well-wrought token of the purgatorial experience, and so is the theater trope that has to do with the theatricalization of Toshiko's consciousness. Hence, the entire scene proves to be a projection of her mind as the cherry blossoms and the scraps of paper take the reader back to the newborn wrapped in bloodstained newspaper. The same holds true of her passing through the "rows of the cherry trees" and "the Abyss of Thousand Birds" (SC 184), which betrays the liminal sense of one's being trapped in the forest of symbols:

Toshiko walked on through the park. Most of the people still remaining there were quite couples; no one paid her any attention. She noticed two people sitting on stone bench beside the moat, not looking at the blossoms, but gazing silently at the water. Pitch black it was, and swathed in heavy shadows. Beyond the moat the somber forest of the Imperial Palace blocked her view. The trees reached up, to form a solid dark mass against the night sky. Toshiko walked slowly along the path beneath the blossoms hanging overhead. (SC 185)

This modern purgatory seems to be laden with the semantics of the performance and the passage through the ritualistic forest. The dominance of the *dark* here is rather characteristic of liminality which is quite often likened to death, invisibility, and darkness, among other things (Turner 1977, 95). Recalling Tess's purgatory, it is quite tempting here to put this extract in parallel to the scene of the trees with inquisitive eyes as experienced by Tess's wretched consciousness of time: both of these female neophytes or liminoids are entrapped in the gnostic performativity of their pseudo-pagan rites of passage.

Toshiko's worst nightmare, moreover, is the idea of her baby and the nurse's wretched baby growing up and meeting one another, when the latter's now miserable young man kills hers. In which case, the act of killing is nothing but a suicide. Recalling Mishima's suicide, this imaginary ritualistic suicide is conceived as another seppuku necessary to redeem the

Japanese spirit. Yet she fancies the idea of putting herself in her now twenty-year old son's stead, ending up facing the gnomic displaced young man wrapped in newspapers: here "[i]t seemed to Toshiko that all her fears and premonitions had suddenly taken concrete form" (SC 186). Such pseudo-transcendental moment might be assumed under a magic-realist chronotope in which the spatio-temporal nexus "is poised in a liminal space and in an in-between time, which, having broken out of the binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge" (Sangari 2000, 912). The narrative ends up with the mystifying note of Toshiko being situated in her "mystical third space" (Cooper 1998, 33). This matches up with her being readily caught up in the grips of uncertainty, in the chora or the third space, neither alive nor dead, when "the forest of the Imperial Palace" (SC 186), another liminal symbol, is wrapped in the pitch dark and silence.

Toshiko's magic-realist transcendence as such is another rendition of the chronoptics of epiphany, and it can be fairly compared to the epiphanic moment as experienced by Tess at Stonehenge, in the "very Temple of the Winds" (*Tess* 415). Toshiko's experience of the threshold between past and future, and herself being dispersed amongst several entities without being—or belonging to—any of them, renders her consciousness and narrative to be the limen (the threshold) itself, and the pre-signifying chora as well. Like Tess, too, she feels now at home and she is ready to *unbe*; that is, to be sacrificed.

CONCLUSION

In a manner of conclusion, it is apt to see Hardy's and Mishima's parallel narratives as providing perspectival mimesis of the liminal experience and its spatial tropes. The late Victorian ache of modernism and the postwar angst of modernity are seen here as variant renditions of the axial-

liminal aesthetic and its chronoptics. They both tend to resolve their female limenoids' dilemma by having recourse to a pseudo-pagan sublimity and by dispersing the sense of selfhood in a kind of agnosticism that thrives in the enigma of the ancestral voices potentially heard in the forest of monoliths or in the abyssal forest of symbols. Recalling Jaspers' view of the axial-age self, one might conclude that this self, now lost for a real transcendence, is opting for a magic realist transcendence of sorts that undoes or perplexes the categories of time and space. In such condition, the female liminoids here aspire to the unselfing of the self. In "Tess's Lament" (1901), Hardy's poetic rendition of the Tess world, one can detect the selfsame poetics of silence. Tess is shown expressing her wish to erase her written life-story, to "unbe", and to "leave no trace of me" (2009, L. 44–48), where she longs desperately for silence. It remains to say that this final closing episode of liminal performativity is not a mere retreat into the unnamable space: Hardy's and Mishima's female liminoids, these dwellers of the unnamable limen-chora, seem to have brought a pre-signifying fracture to both the Victorian and modernist mimetic discourses.

NOTES

¹A different meaning of the term "liminoid" is being suggested here; within the context of this study *liminoid* is indicative more of the agent who is experiencing liminality than of the optional, playful, and leisurely sense of liminality as suggested by Turner (1983, 33).

²In his "Anthropology, Multiple Modernities and the Axial Age Debate," Bjørn Thomassen (2010) suggests that the Axial Age can be considered a historically liminal period.

³Bakhtin thus characterizes *chronotope* as he posits: "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible;

likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (1981, 1).

⁴*Chora* or *Khôra* was the territory of the Ancient Greek polis outside the city proper. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the term is used to designate a receptacle (as a “third kind” (35a, 49a), a space, a room, or an interval. In Jacques Derrida’s *On the Name* (1995), *Khôra* is that which is “neither this nor that, at times both this and that.” It is “this alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation” (89). In Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), “[t]he *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position” (26). The poetics of the limen as has been demonstrated in this study share, to a larger or lesser degree, of these different renditions of the term *chora*.

⁵Reference is made here to Turner’s book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967).

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