

Objects in Hardy and Conrad

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According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, an “object” is “a thing placed before the eye or presented to one of the senses”. The word comes from the Latin word *objectum*, itself derived from *obicere*, which means “to throw” (*jacere*) “before” (*ob*). An “object”, whether it is an artifact or not, may be put to some purpose. But the object as “thrown before” the subject, as a “person or thing to which action or feeling is directed”, may also refer to the thing aimed at by human desire.

With Hardy, and then with Conrad, the nineteenth century is drawing to a close. In the Victorian era, especially after the Great Exhibition of 1851 — which marked the beginning of the consumer society — objects multiplied in the daily life of English people. Victorian homes became overcrowded with decorative objects, and Dickens’s novels were said to be “crowded novels” (E. K. Brown), filled with a multitude of useless details or objects. Fullness is what prevails in the aesthetics of the time.

What happened at the turn of the century, with Hardy and Conrad? Let us take the example of a small object, which usually serves as a social marker, the hat: in *Great Expectations* it is an object that Joe does not know what to do with when he visits Pip in London, and which produces a comical effect. What about the hat lost by Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which is found by Gabriel Oak? What can be said of those strange hats which, in Joseph Conrad’s fiction, for instance in *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Sharer*, produce a *punctum* effect in the *studium* of representation, creating confusion in the perception of reality, in an aesthetics which is radically different from that of Dickens?

In Hardy, one may also wonder about all those “surplus objects” which disturb reality in the diegesis: the red ribbon in Tess’s hair, the roses she is adorned with on her return from Trantridge, the ring which shines among odds and ends on the grassy floor in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the engagement ring which Boldwood forces on to Bathsheba’s finger, etc.. Objects can also be missing: they may be lost, found, handed back to their owner, retrieved after perilous operations. They can be antiques exhumed from a barrow. They can be given, exchanged, sold. When the lost object is irreplaceable, we enter the realm of tragedy. For when *jouissance* takes over from desire, the quest for the object turns into a craving for the forbidden Thing.

Focusing on objects in Hardy and Conrad means focusing on what the two writers have in common — that is to say on their modernity. And of course on what differentiates them. It also means raising the question of their texts as *objets d’art* — sublime objects, in Lacan’s words, i.e. “elevated to the dignity of the Thing” (J. Lacan, *The Seminar*, VII, “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis”, p. 138). The “ring”, that small hollow metallic object which surrounds a void and catches the eye in Hardy’s stories is also the resonance which the voice of the text allows us to hear. Similarly Lord Jim’s “gem” has, if we believe Conrad, the charm of works of art (“the futility, often the charm, and sometimes the deep hidden truthfulness of works of art” *Lord Jim*, p. 168). Behind the semblances which cover things, what unnameable thing may be made visible (and audible) by Hardy’s art? (“my art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc. so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible” *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, 3 jan 1886, p. 183).