

The Ache of Modernism

— The Ache of the Age Reflected in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* —

Chen Zhen

1. General Remarks

Behold man, without home
 orphaned, alone, impotent
 facing the dark abyss; . . .
 And in this strange mysterious night
 he sees and knows a fatal heritage.
 (F. I. Tiutshev, "The Abyss")

Literature originates from life and reflects life in turn from a higher viewpoint. Literary work is set in a certain historical background and absorbs nutriment from social reality. As the dramatized reality, literature artistically represents many aspects of history and society, which serve as the sources for literature creation. Reversely history and society are woven into the fabric of a good literary work. In the perspective of dialectical materialism, history plays a great part in shaping Tess's fate. To some extent, her tragedy is destined by the special history in which she exists; in turn, she, as the product of her history, reflects the qualities her history endows her generation. When Hardy wrote *Tess*, England was experiencing severe strains to adjust to immense alterations in its structure at the time of complete social transition from the old to new. The transition and problems juxtaposing it plunged the whole country into the nightmare of predicament—"the ache of modernism" that is called the feeling of the age by Angel in the novel. Bewilderment and perplexity covered this old traditional European country. The old world still lingered with the remaining glories, while the new one was too tender to smash the old and thrive as the leading trend.

People at this time were disoriented, groping in the darkness for the right way to a peaceful life. New phenomena and ideas emerged every day; however, no "ism" or doctrine could satisfy people as Christianity had and bring them back to the peace and tranquility of the long-cherished patriarchy. Struggling on such a "blighted star" (TD 35), life was doomed to tragedy. The protagonists share the common feeling that death is better than existence. How to survive this nightmare is a question haunting everybody. In *Tess*, readers can find that this puzzlement is rooted in the distinctive history full of changes and upheavals. The world is all disorderly. The sun is to rise, but the night is still weakly lingering. History is experiencing the darkest dawn and people are witnessing the most obscure darkness before daybreak, in which they can

by no means find the sanctuary for salvation from the abyss of melancholy.

In *Tess*, Hardy raises many questions about society, religion, morals, sex and the contrast between two eras, old and new. Douglas Brown proclaims that the central theme of Hardy's novel is "the tension between the old rural world and the new urban one."¹⁾ Readers can infer from the novel the problems encountered by the central characters, who are indeed wandering between two worlds, a traditional past and modern future, in the particular transitional period just as Matthew Arnold indicates:

Wandering between two worlds;
One dead,
The other powerless to be born.
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn. (Arnold 85)

One of the leading themes of the book is the question acute in the late Victorian Age— how to live when religion no longer satisfies spiritual needs and illuminates soul like a beacon at the night sea. The protagonists not only find themselves stranded between two worlds in terms of belief, but also in the way of life. Tess has no way to escape from the "blighted" world. In the darkness, she is dimly conscious of her sorrow and plight. She is aware that she is helplessly trapped in this torrent of historical river. Misery is the only companion on her journey to the last destination—death.

To obtain a good understanding of the novel and the tragic fate of Tess, we need to trace back to the late Victorian Age (Queen Victoria reigned from 1837—1901), the age of changes and problems. Social contradictions grew severer and struggles between different classes became fiercer. This situation was intensified by the colonial expansion. Contradictions between classes within the country and those between nations outside springing from colonial expansion pushed England into the boiling pot of problems. This period was the time when England was experiencing the predicament of modernism. English society was wallowing in the severe strains in its attempts to adjust to the vast shifts in its structure. The country was completely plunged into the sea of trouble and difficulty, in which the protagonists dimly sense the misfortune. Nothing could relieve their ache emotionally and spiritually. People came to understand that modernism was trouble-making, ache-causing and had the negative effect on human life as the root of the world dismay overwhelming hearts. The agony from life hardships caused by the seismic social transformation was intensified by the ideological revolution launched by the epoch-making book *The Origin of Species* written by Charles Darwin. Suddenly people were plunged into the bewilderment of without Christianity and melancholy pervaded the world. This dismay people experienced in the special social and historical context where traditional belief was challenged and defeated by the brand new theory of evolution was the major ingredient of the ache of modernism. Modernism, with its power and new thought, was

menacing the traditional view of life and the old values passed down from the patriarchal society with Christianity as the spiritual cornerstone and undermining the old way of life. It was the emotional price human beings paid in the progress of modernization and civilization and the spiritual suffering when they were disoriented on the divergent paths, Darwinism or Bible (Genesis), modernity or tradition. Modernism was storming the ideological world dominated by Christianity. So the ache of modernism is a philosophical term instead of a political one; it is the phenomenon concerning how humanity views the world and life.

The Industrial Revolution, with its overwhelming impact, forced English society to make corresponding changes to fit in with the new revolutionary trend. This transformation meant uprooting the traditional way of life, which gave a much greater blow to peasants in backward areas with “South Wessex” as the example. The long-lasting peace, tranquility and harmony of patriarchy were threatened by the destructive progress of industrialization, whose central aim was to develop industry and enhance modernization at the cost of destroying agriculture, esp. the traditional agricultural economic mode.

The symbolic description of the accident, which triggers the tragedy of Tess, vividly displays the historical context of the story, in which the Industrial Revolution with the mail-cart as the symbol forcefully and swiftly crushes down the old agricultural economy weakly struggling with its remnant breath before peasants’ awareness. It breaks the last dream of the countrymen and brings them to the terrible social reality—another world. This metaphor indicates the frightening destructivity of the industrialization. Tess’s tragedy is historically conditioned, socially constructed and economically shaped—it is destined in the frightening hurricane of social transformation in the late Victorian Age. As Kettle states, “*Tess* is a novel with a true thesis. The thesis is that in the latter half of the last century the disintegration of the peasantry—a process which had its roots deep in the past—had reached its final and tragic stage.”²⁾ For her fate is historically destined and socially shaped. Wright Terence indicates that Tess’s tragedy resides “not so much in human personality, with its loves and hates, beliefs and morality, as in the forces of society, in economics and the movements of history”.³⁾ Hardy, as a sensitive man, acutely observes the predicament of the agricultural community in his native land and the decline of the patriarchal way of life due to social changes. Tess is the victim of historical movement. *Tess* is the miniature of Victorian English countryside and Tess is in a sense the victim of the ache of modernism—the “fatal heritage” that Tiutshev speaks of in his poem, also what Matthew Arnold, in his poem “The Scholar Gypsy,” associates with “this strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, its divided aims.”

2. Nature of the Ache of Modernism

In *Tess*, Hardy raises “the ache of modernism”—“the feelings which might almost have been called those of the age.” (TD 129) What is the real implication of the ache of modernism? What is the interrelationship between it and the tragedy of the heroine? What is the social

background? Since the publication of the book, many people have been concerned with these topics and interpreted them in different perspectives. The exploration of the essence of this 'ache' has been the focus for literature critics. According to David J. De Laura, the ache of modernism is the compound of problems, ideas and feeling. The ache from social reformation is intensified by ideological revolution. It is a period when fundamental beliefs—religious, social—are shattered and denied and spiritual bewilderment pervades England. New scientific thoughts and political systems are appearing and prevailing. Moral conviction separate from the experience of paralysis of will, melancholy is the major ingredient of the “modern” dilemma faced by the protagonists in *Tess*. Spiritual emptiness intensifies the sad mood from social transformation common in that period. This sad sentiment is the major feeling of the modern ache. In other words, it is the spiritual crisis emanating from enormous social changes particularly in the late Victorian Age—a gloomy mood among the people who witness the changes and ill effects.

In Hardy's opinion, “the ache of modernism” means a prevailing mood of self-consciousness, bewilderment and melancholy caused by the uncertainty of life due to the social changes and by the ebbing of the sea of faith, a sense of being stranded between epochs which fit uneasily. It can be understood as the philosophical despair and sense of isolation in the capricious society. Usually it involves two aspects—in one respect it refers to the rootlessness of being trapped in the interface of two eras, the feeling of suspending between two terminals which are not easy to connect, the lostness of people stranded in the time abysses; in another respect it means the sense of drifting in a world without Providence. Simply speaking, it is the combination of agony and despair from social transformation and perplexity and emptiness without Christian belief. In other words it is the spiritual crisis centered on belief crisis in the particular period in English history. Matthew Arnold, in his early poetry, defines it as the “emotional price of modernism.” Modernism in Wright Terence's eyes means an “increasing awareness of and reliance on a rational and scientific view of man.”⁴⁾ The ache of modernism is the bitterness humans feel on the way towards science and rationality and it is a precarious sense in the course of civilization. Thomas Hardy himself interprets it by saying “The Christian who has experientially understood that life without Christ is a tragedy should have an ache in his or her heart for unbelievers to find the fulfillment that is in Christ.”⁵⁾

Modernism brings chances and energy for development as well as social problems and spiritual worries. In a sense, the latter exceeds the former. Modernism is not realized smoothly but at a huge cost of emotion. It is the root of all gloomy feelings of the age. People hate modernity and refuse modernism in *Tess*, in particular in relatively remote rural areas. Just as Matthew Arnold puts it, the ache of modernism is the price of modernization, the emotional expense of industrialization. Social change is a course of agony to establish the new by rejecting the old. It evokes a lingering agony among people. The protagonists in *Tess* are typical representatives of those people suffering in the English countryside during this particular period of historical development. Experiencing this poignant distress, they are puzzled why

mankind should find himself tormented and destroyed for no apparent purpose of reason, and this is an acute question to Victorians. Heavy bewilderment about the world and life covers hearts of Victorians experiencing all this mess of the world.

In Hardy's formative years, this bewilderment from enormous social change was culminated by the epoch-making theory of evolution raised by Charles Darwin. The publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 changed the way man understands himself and the world. Evolutionism swept the world like a prairie fire, launching a drastic revolution in ideology with its new theory of biological development—the theory of evolution. It indicates that heredity and environment play a decisive role in biological development. Life on the earth is not the 6-day product of a divine creator, but the outcome of random evolutionary process. The origin of human beings is the same as those of other organisms. Christianity was under relentless attack both from its precarious philosophical basis and from its historical authenticity. Darwin's evolutionary principle extended man's world not only geographically but chronologically, from a span of less than six thousand years to millions of millenniums. Darwinism shook the Victorian conventional belief from the foundation. People lost the pious faith in religion, skeptic of the existence of all-powerful God. They began to understand Christianity in a new position; simultaneously they sank in the crisis of faith which might have no parallel in English intellectual history. This philosophic dilemma is what Hardy calls "the ache of modernism," that is, "the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent power." (TD 123) Modernism undermined the patriarchal way of life and now Darwinism overthrew the religion which, to a large extent, dominated their life and society generation after generation.

Spiritually disoriented, people worried in the darkness of bewilderment. New ideas emerged now and then, while no one could satisfy men as Christianity had. They asked themselves what the world would be like if there was no God. Many people were afraid that the world would be more confused and immoral if God no longer dominated man's life. There was no doctrine they could repose their faith and trust on. This belief void is the soil for the generation of the sad feeling. Therefore the ache of modernism is interpreted by many as the belief crisis or the emotional syndrome when Christianity was no longer worshipped as the only doctrine. It is also the result of the long-term struggle between science and religion, tradition and modernity. This period is the dark age in emotion in English history. Here's a description about the shock of Darwinism in *English Literature in Victorian Age*:

Under the shock of Darwinism all that was good in the Victorian rationalism shook and dissolved like dust. One must not ask how they lived, for that is politics. One must not ask how they died, for that is religion. And religion and politics were ruled out of the entire later Victorian debating clubs, even including the debating club at Westminster. This coincident collapse of both religious and political idealism produced a curious cold air of emptiness and real subconscious agnosticism such as is extremely unusual in history of

mankind. (Chesterton 264)

Darwin and Spencer much influenced Hardy's outlook on religion and the world. He described himself as "among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*."⁶⁾ As a Darwinism follower, Hardy, on the one hand, tried to comfort himself with the idea that the universe might in the course of time evolve a satisfactory moral sense which could assure the happiness of mankind; on the other hand, he still had a cloud of doubt whether evolution would in the end bring any good to human society and he still clung to the spiritual comfort and moral restriction brought by religion. Hardy lost his faith in Christianity, many of his writings dramatizing aspects of "the pernicious influence of religious doctrines or the ineffectuality of institutional Christianity,"⁷⁾ but he could also evoke a wistful sense of the loss of an earlier simpler faith, or affirm the lasting value of Christianity. Facing the confusing world, he could not find a doctrine that could satisfy his emotional needs and spiritual gap. For a time, he was in deep bewilderment and perplexity lost in the blindness without Providence. Hardy sank in the dilemma of contradiction between science and religion, suffering from the imbalance of sense and emotion. As time went on, Hardy became an atheist, he wrote towards the end of his life, "I have been looking for God 50 years and I think that if he existed, I should have discovered him."⁸⁾ The distress from the disorderly world and the depression from the void of belief were intertwined as a shadow haunted Hardy and his contemporaries and that could be designated as the reason why Hardy became a pessimist who regarded life itself as a tragedy. An entry in his notebook reads:

This hum of the wheel—the roar of London! What is it composed of? Hurry. Speech, laughter, moans, cries of little children. The people in this tragedy laugh, sing, smoke, toss off wines, etc., make love to girls in drawing-rooms and areas; and yet are playing their parts in the tragedy just the same. Some wear jewels and feathers, some wear rags. All are caged birds; the only difference lies in the size of the cage. This too is part of the tragedy. (Hardy Florence Emily 224)

It is widely acknowledged that Hardy was a pessimist though he did not accept it himself. And he found a new term for himself—evolutionary meliorist. According to Oxford Dictionary, 'meliorism' refers to a belief that mankind tends to meliorate and that conscious human effort may further this tendency. He indicated that to improve the miserable world and free humans from earthly pains and melancholy, they must first of all see reality clearly and find its evils and problems. Secondly they must struggle themselves and wait for nothing from God. Thirdly they must have some belief and practice under its guidance.⁹⁾ When talking about poetry art with Xu Zhimo, the Chinese poet who was greatly influenced by his aestheticism in the twentieth century, Hardy told him he did not like the free poetry cherished by 'modernists' and he preferred rhymed poetry organic like a living thing in which the rhyme resembled the

ripples appearing on the water after a stone was cast into the lake.¹⁰⁾ Modernism brought chances; meanwhile it brought disasters described as the ache of modernism. Actually the ache of modernism is the decisive factor of the formation of his pessimism. Wessex, called by him 'partly-real and partly-dream' kingdom, is the setting where he discharged his complex feelings about humanity and the world and created his regional myths.

3. Historical Background of the Ache of Modernism

Though each phase of every age can be said to be 'transitional' in some sense, the last fifteen-year phase of the period 1830-90 is, like the first, clearly transitional in its cultural, social and political history. At each end of the Victorian period the new mixes uneasily with the old.¹¹⁾ The Industrial Revolution with its overwhelming power disintegrated the traditional English agriculture and patriarchal system and drove English peasants to the verge of death. The sense of safety people had in the patriarchal society had been swept away by historical torrent and vanished as its age in the history river, entirely beyond recuperation, leaving the peasants only the endless misery and bitterness. The disintegration of rural economy and collapse of old-styled agriculture impoverished peasants to the foundation and entrapped them in the frightening nightmare. The economic transformation forced peasants to exile from their native villages to seek sustenance in alien places, where they were mercilessly exploited and cruelly oppressed by the new-born capitalist class who substituted the aristocracy as the upper class. Due to poverty, they were homeless and drifted from place to place. They lived in the sea of misery, bitterness and hardships. Rider Haggard gives a vivid depiction of the invasion of capitalist economy and the disintegration of agricultural economy in the conclusions to his *Rural England* which is accepted by Hardy as a documentation of the state of agriculture at the end of the 19th century. "Free Trade has filled the towns and emptied our countryside; it has gorged the banks but left our rickyards bare!"¹²⁾

Transformation involved every field of the society and the agricultural situation increasingly deteriorated. Railroads shortened the distance between town and countryside, communication commenced. And an elementary education designed for urban life spread widely, which was the need of urbanization. Although the male franchise was further extended in the 1880s, perhaps the most profound change in the life of the British populace was the emergence of the first generation to be educated under Forster's Education Act of 1870.¹³⁾ Tess's "education of sixth standard in the National school under a London-trained mistress" (TD 26) is the response to the trend, which creates "a gap of two hundred years between her and her mother with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads." (TD 28) Under the continuous lure of flourishing industry and the attraction of the towns, the historical exodus of rural areas began. In *Tess*, Hardy describes this unnatural exodus and the decline of the countryside as:

Cottagers who were not directly employed on the land were looked upon with disfavour, and the banishment of some starved the trade of the others, who were thus obliged to follow. These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositaries of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as “the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns,” being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery. (TD 339)

With the growing decline of agriculture, there appeared, in English history, a campaign of depopulation in the rural areas. This exodus directly resulted in the further disintegration of traditional agriculture in the countryside, the nearly extinction of the farming culture which occupied the dominant position for a long time in English culture, and the disappearance of rural prosperity. South Wessex in the closing decades of the 19th century was such a shabby and miserable scene. When Hardy roamed Dorset countryside, he was “dismayed by the evidence of appalling disaster, buildings crumbled, fences collapsed, roads decayed, and farmhouses abandoned.”¹⁴ The destruction of agriculture meant not only the decline of the countryside economy but also the general alienation of English countrymen from the traditional life style in contact with nature, which in all previous ages had helped to form the mind and imagination of the island race. It embodied the collapse of a culture which took its root in soil. English peasants were tortured by the cooperation of spiritual alienation, poverty and the misery of exile from home community. In *A Hardy Companion*, we know there was one class of families, lifeholders, particularly vulnerable, whose cottages and gardens were leased by the lord of their manor for three generations. If the treaty was due, the cottage would be taken back or demolished by the owner, leaving the lifeholder’s family homeless for the moment. Tess’s father is such a lifeholder trapped in the sense of crisis of losing the shelter. His death leads to the eviction of the family, which drives Tess into the pit of fire.

To adapt to the new economic situation, peasants became agricultural workers or the agricultural proletariat. Unemployment was common. The wage of these agricultural workers was only high enough to keep body and soul together. In Dorset, one of the very poorest counties in England, it was worse, usually no more than twelve shillings a week. In *Tess*, the hardships endured by women on farms are seen at Flintcomb-Ash. A popular song, “The Fine Old English Laborer” can help understand the miserable life of English agricultural laborers.

He used to take whatever wage the farmer chose to pay,
 And work as hard as any horse for eighteen pence a day,
 Or if he grumbled at the nine, and dared to ask for ten,
 The angry farmer cursed and swore, and sacked him there and then.
 He used to tramp off to his work while town folk were abed,
 With nothing in his belly but a slice or two of bread;

He dined upon potatoes, and he never dreamed of meat,
 Except a lump of bacon fat sometimes by way of treat.
 He used to find it hard enough to give his children food,
 But sent them to the village school as often as he could;
 But though he knew that school was good, they must have bread and clothes,
 So he had to send them to the fields to scare away the crows.
 (Williams 53)

Hardy is a realistic writer, who, in his novel, truly represents the social reality in the rural area in the late Victorian Age. The panorama of the English rustic society experiencing drastic transformation is reincarnated in *Tess*. Now isolated backward Dorset is somewhat to be industrialized by the introduction of machinery and railway which brings the towns nearer to countrymen and profoundly influences the life there. Light of new era has slightly uncovered the mysterious veil of the secluded agricultural areas still sleeping in another world—the ancient patriarchal world. Villagers have dimly realized the sharp change of the world with a strange feeling. Either the train or the threshing-machine in *Tess* reflects the invasion and destruction forced upon traditional agriculture by industrialization. In *Tess*, Hardy gives us such a vivid description as follows:

They crept along towards a point in the expanse of shade just at hand at which a feeble light was beginning to assert its presence; a spot where, by day, a fitful white streak of steam at intervals upon the dark green background denoted intermittent moments of contact between their secluded world and modern life. Modern life stretched out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touched the native existences, and quickly withdrew its feeler again, as if what it touched had been uncongenial.

They reached the feeble light, which came from the smoky lamp of a little railway-station; a poor enough terrestrial star, yet in one sense of more importance to Talbothays Dairy and mankind than the celestial ones to which it stood in such humiliating contrast. The cans of new milk were unladen in the rain, Tess getting a little shelter from a neighboring holly-tree.

Then there was the hissing of the train which drew up almost silently upon the wet rails, and the milk was rapidly swung can by can into the truck. The light of the engine flashed for a second upon Tess Durbeyfield's figure, motionless under the great holly-tree. No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause, the print gown of no date or fashion, and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow. (TD 187-188)

The train functions as the bridge connecting the city and the countryside. The “feeble light”

in the “expanse of shade” is soon identified as emanating from the “smoky lamp” in the railway station. The “hissing” of the train reminds of the massive and noisy piece of machinery which must have made such a deep impression on those seeing and hearing it for the ‘first’ time. As an intruder in the countryside the train produces a sound not to be found in nature. The machine as the symbol of change and modernity is the strangest object she’s experienced. The contrast between “streak of steam” and “a dark green background” symbolizes the contrast of two worlds and two epochs, the Industrial Age and the Agrarian Age. The industrial civilization is replacing the agricultural civilization, by undermining the traditional farming and the rural culture. Modernity is somewhat secretly infiltrating the countryside and threatening the tranquility and security of the pastoral harmony of the rural areas. Hostility towards machinery prevails among the countrymen, which can be discovered between the lines in *Tess*. Modernity is unwelcome with its hidden harm disintegrating the tradition and old life style which have been established and well accepted for ages. The threshing-machine as the hint of industrialization is described as an indifferent intruder into the harmony of the natural scene:

Close under the eaves of the stack, and as yet barely visible was the red tyrant that the women had come to serve—a timber-framed construction, with straps and wheels appertaining—the threshing-machine, which, whilst it was going, kept up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves.

A little way off there was another indistinct figure; this one black, with a sustained hiss that spoke of strength very much in reserve. The long chimney running up beside an ash-tree, and the warmth which radiated from the spot, explained without the necessity of much daylight that here was the engine which was to act as the *primum mobile* of this little world. By the engine stood a dark motionless being, a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness, in a sort of trance, with a heap of coals by his side; it was the engine-man. The isolation of this manner and color lent him the appearance of a creature from Tophet, who had strayed into the pellucid smokelessness of this region of yellow grain and pale soil, with which he had nothing in common, to amaze and to discompose its aborigines.

What he looked he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather frost, and sun. He traveled with his engine from farm to farm, from country to country, for as yet the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex. He spoke in a strange northern accent, his thoughts being turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron charge; hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all; holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives, as if some ancient doom compelled him to wander here against his will in the service of his Plutonic master. The long strap which ran from the driving-wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him. (TD 315-316)

The “red tyrant” keeps on working in its way regardless of the fatigue of the women, whose life is more miserable under the harsh Victorian social laws and moral codes on women. In threshing, their work is arduous and dull, especially feeding the threshing-machine and keeping up with the steam tyrant. The engine-man is also the alien in the natural world with his eccentric appearance, turned-in thought, and strange northern accent. He is part of that alien, tyrannical force of industrial civilization which victimizes Tess and her folks. His indifference towards the agriculture world parallels that of his “red tyrant” partner. He is related to fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields, vegetation, weather frost, and sun. They belong to two quite different worlds, which embody respectively two stark distinctive economic kinds—industry and agriculture. The disharmony of the northern engine-man and the “red tyrant” in the agricultural scene simultaneously symbolizes the conflict between the north and the south, between the capitalism and the patriarchy. It is industrialization that breaks the peace, tranquility, stability and harmony of the patriarchal society in the rural areas. Here readers can feel Hardy’s partial lingering emotions towards patriarchy and the dislike of capitalism. He regrets bitterly the disappearance of the relatively independent and intermediate class as his, esp. the disappearance of the long-cherished patriarchal way of life in his hometown communities. “Through *Tess*, Hardy seeks to establish his intuition of the potential value of agricultural life, and to celebrate the naturalness of men and women engaged in the skills and necessities of agriculture.”¹⁵⁾

Rationally Hardy realizes the weakness and stagnation of the old agriculture, but emotionally he is also skeptic of the new industry. Reluctance to conform to the new phenomena is the common mood overflowing in his works, *Tess* regarded as the example. The threshing-machine is metaphorically contrasted to ‘red tyrant’ which is propelled with fuel and is used to bring money and capital to its owner and which is mercilessly exploiting and oppressing the laborers, especially women. It is an alien to the environment, out of harmony in this agricultural world. Its owner, the engineman seems ruthless and is also incongruous with an accent from the North that is the center and headquarters of industrialization. Here it is not difficult to find Hardy’s intention of highlighting the cultural conflict between the north and the south in the special historical period in England—the contradiction of two economic modes and two lifestyles with their distinctions. Hardy’s dissatisfaction with mechanization and modernity stands out everywhere in the novel and in the meanwhile his nostalgia is fully expressed. As a tradition-lover and classicism-advocator, he is unwilling to follow the new trend and refuses modernism. In a sense, Hardy is also something of a primitivist and regionalist with a strong ‘Wessex complex’. Although the inevitability of the disintegration of the old is historically destined, he emotionally cherishes it, partly because industrialization is so harsh and cruel that it brings too much bitterness and hardships for his simple good-natured yeomen. In 1902, in his letter to the novelist Rider Haggard, he describes the poor condition of the countrymen in Dorset as follows:

As to your first question, my opinion on the past of the agricultural laborers in this county: I think, indeed know, that down to 1850 or 1855 their condition was in general one of great hardships. As a child I knew a sheep-keeping boy who to my horror shortly afterwards died of want—the contents of his stomach at the autopsy being raw turnip only. (Hardy 312)

Agricultural situation weakened further; unemployment spread throughout the countryside. Statistics show that from 1875 until 1879 the harvests were very bad and in 1878, hundreds of thousands of sheep and cattle were destroyed by animal diseases. Besides, continuous wheat cheapening had a large area of rich soil abandoned, driving another hundred thousand workers to leave the countryside. In 1886, as imports extended to include frozen meat, cheese, butter and wool in large quantities, agriculture was ruined further again. Depression prevailed in the countryside.

No one could be immune from the historical misfortune imposed upon them by social transformations. One who by thrift had survived the first depression succumbed to the second. By 1888, there were 750,000 workers left on the land; the acreage under cultivation still diminished. The widespread personal and clan characteristics got lost as well as the humorous simplicity of the men and the unsophisticated modesty of the women. The days of high farming, the days of peasantry, were beyond recall. The long-cherished stability, security, peace and harmony of patriarchy had become by-gones. Fleeing the distress of country life! However, the reality was never like the fable they pictured. Their dream had broken again, sending them into the new sea of misery—out of the frying-pan into the fire!

The decline of agriculture juxtaposed the collapse of patriarchy and the rural culture, which was more unbearable for denizens whose life had been rooted in the traditional agricultural society. Their pessimistic melancholy can be called the root of “the ache of modernism.” Economic transformation impoverished peasants; poverty led to exodus; exodus caused collapse of rural civilization; this collapse brought intellectual misery in turn. And the strong cultural confrontation between agricultural civilization and urban civilization is one of the sources of the tragedy of people of Tess’s class. They are, in a sense, victims of invasion of modern civilization. *Tess* is the history of the vicissitudes of English peasants involved in the seismic social transformation in the late Victorian Age. Hardy expresses his great sympathy for the unlucky peasants and shows endless nostalgia for the native traditional customs and dislike of the invasion of capitalism with the threshing machine as the embodiment. Douglas describes *Tess* as follows:

In the novel, Hardy brought Tess, a strong-natured country girl disciplined by the necessities of agricultural life, into relation with men and women from outside the rural world, better educated, superior in status, yet inferior in human worth. The contact occasions a sense of invasion, of disturbance. (Brown 30)

4. Reflection of the Ache of Modernism in *Tess*

Hardy's darkening vision of universal pain and alienation, his sense of a fragmenting society and his portrayal of women, especially of Sue Brideshead, to whom Jude exclaims 'how modern you are!' (III 1), all suggest that a discussion of *Tess* and *Jude* makes a fitting coda to a study of English fiction of the period 1830-1890, as these novels point forward to twentieth-century themes. (Wheeler 211-212)

Tess is the vehicle which conveys the feeling of the age—the ache of modernism. The instability of Hardy's central characters becomes crucial in *Tess*, where sudden changes in Alec and Angel—both half-men—destroy the heroine-victim. Jude's son, Little Father Time, represents a new generation in his question: "I ought not to be born, ought I?"¹⁶⁾ The doctor who examines his corpse says that the boy is among the "boys of a sort unknown in the last generation—the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. It is the beginning of the universal wish not to live."¹⁷⁾ The ache from modernism was the common sadness at that time and it was universal phenomenon which was for a long time the knotty problem for the people who experienced this historical period. How to retrieve the sense of safety and the sense of dignity they once had remained an enduring obsession.

Alec's talk with Tess when she determines to leave him, "I suppose I am a bad fellow—a damn bad fellow. I was born bad, and I have lived bad, and I shall die bad, in all probability," (TD 83) shows Hardy's evolutionary idea—heredity and environment determination. It is the operation of Darwinism and social Darwinism proposed first by Herbert Spencer that conditions Alec's immutable badness and Tess's nobility inherited from their ancestors. So their life tracks are somewhat biologically destined and their characters are genetically determined. He implies the part of heredity and environment in Tess's tragedy particularly from her born character. He admits the inevitability of modernization from a social Darwinist perspective; meanwhile he expresses his perplexity on "modernism". The decline of conventional social values and Christian belief can be found in *Tess*.

In *Tess*, Hardy illustrates "his conviction that not only is there no Providence guiding individual men and women in the right way, but in many cases at least, there is something like a malign fate which draws them out of the right way into the wrong way."¹⁸⁾ Upon Tess's virginity collapse, Hardy questions, "Where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the Providence of her simple faith?" (TD 77) If God exists, how can such awkward things happen? On her way home, Tess sees a God's servant painting large square letters on the wall, "THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT." (TD 85) She feels the text "horrible," "crushing" and "killing". About it, Hardy comments that "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". Clearly it implies that the old doctrines have lost the kingdom where they dominated the mind and that they do not work now. Hardy satirizes the ignorance of the old creed holders for the obsolescence of their practice. This episode also implies the dramatic changes in people's attitude towards religion. There is another wonderful episode in *Tess*, which reveals the recession of religious faith at the time, too. When Tess asks the clergyman in her village whether it is the same for Sorrow as if he has been baptized by him, "he was disposed to say no. Yet the dignity of the girl, the strange tenderness in her voice, combined to affect his nobler impulses—or rather those that he had left in him after ten years of endeavor to graft technical belief on actual skepticism. The man and the ecclesiastic fought within him, and the victory fell to the man." (TD 100) Humanity is loftier than divinity when God has tended to be defeated by modernism in the long-term struggle. Humanity is exalted over divinity, which is considered as the eternal theme since man entered modern civilization.

Alec's conversion to Christianity and rejection of it is another example of his fluctuation and uncertainty in religion. He is a man without a determined belief drifting blindly in his life. At the same time, it shadows his course of belief changes from devout faith to abandonment of religion under the influence of modernism. Alec is also in bewilderment mixing theology and morals, which, in Hardy's opinion, are two different things. Tess tries to tell him "he had mixed in his dull brain two matters, theology and morals, which in the primitive days of mankind had been quite distinct." (TD 320) Hardy presents Alec as a typical example within Christian history. As Tess discovers, "The greater the sinner the greater the saint: it was not necessary to dive far into Christianity to discover that." (TD 298) Hardy relentlessly mocks this absurdity of Christianity. His attitude towards religion can find expression in his works especially his last two, *Tess* and *Jude*.

Angel expresses his puzzle in anguish, "God is not in his heaven; all's wrong with the world." (TD 248) Many critics observe that this is the denial of the blind optimistic tendency in the intellectual world with Robert Browning as the representative since he published in 1841 his dramatic poem, "Pippa Passes" in which are two lines "God's in the heaven/All's right with the world!" Many people tend to believe that if religion lost its world, men would become more immoral and the world would be more disorderly. Tess sees the world as "blighted." She regrets that she had been born in this world of chaos. William Butler Yeats, in "The Second Coming" (1919), also underlines the ravages and the desperations of such fatal consequences in modern life: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Tess wishes "she had never been born—there or anywhere else." (TD 82) She fears life and fears the world. To her, just as to Hardy, life is itself a tragedy and misery where even Providence is helpless to the way the world progresses, only to leave man with distress. Stricken with the 'mental disease' of the age, Angel is spiritually confused. Many learners hold that his reappearance in Tess's life at Talbothays, as Hardy describes, suggests he is a person who has lost his way in life. Hardy transplants his intellectual bewilderment, in the seismic social transformation, in his protagonists. They are first conscious of and suffering from the

predicament of the age, “the ache of modernism”. Hardy presents it in the conversation between Tess and Angel:

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

“O 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?”

“It is—now you put it in that way.”

“All the same I shouldn’t have expected a young girl like you to see it so just yet. Now is it you do?”

She remained a hesitating silence.

“Come, Tess: tell me in confidence.”

She thought that he meant what were the aspects of things to her, and replied shyly: “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!’...But you, sir, can raise up dreams with your music, and drive all such horrid fancies away!” (TD 128)

Angel who is experiencing the ache of modernism is surprised to find Tess, who is but a milkmaid, shaping such sad imaginings. Hardy depicts Angel’s drifting situation like this—“Nevertheless, something nebulous, preoccupied vague, in his bearing and regard, marked him as one who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future.” (TD 119) He is stranded between two epochs. “Between himself and his father there is a difference in age that there seems almost a missing generation.” (TD 119) It is clearly a metaphor for the gap between the old parson, thoroughly devout, and his comparatively free-thinking youngest son. Losing faith in Christ, he abandons the career as a clergyman and devotes himself to modern farming which can guarantee “intellectual liberty.” (TD 121) However, he can not be spared in the age of “the ache of modernism”. He cannot see the world from its realistic nature, but from

his ideal imagination, which hinders him from treating the world as a natural existence, which conditions his predicament.

Away from home, he is drifting restless and unattached. His abandonment of the admirable profession as a clergyman with the honor and glory of God and desire to become a modern agriculturist which he anticipates to be an ideal occupation, to some extent, explain his betrayal from his class and his religious belief. Life experience lets him realize that the world is not as ideal as he imagines. He does not know how to face a world without Christ and how to behave on this strange star. Drifting in his idealized world which never exists in reality, he becomes an abstract “intelligence” instead of an individual with the combination of body and mind. He is only a “ghost” fluctuating in the fancied world, who is destined to perish in the real world. His precarious ideas incur harm to Tess as well as to himself. His dissociation from the reality can also find expressions in his understanding of Tess. Tess, to him, is not a milkmaid but a “visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form!” (TD 134-135) Angel’s disease deteriorates as his pilgrimage advances. Angel is also doomed to tragedy.

Tess, on her part, could not understand why a man of clerical family and good education, and above physical want, should look upon it as a mishap to be alive. For the unhappy pilgrim Herself there was very good reason. But how could this admirable and poetic man ever have descended into the valley of Humiliation, have felt with the man of Uz—as she herself had felt two or three years ago—“my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life. I loathe it; I would not live always.” (TD 129)

Tess is also experiencing this terrible disease of that age and she sees all tomorrows as “very fierce and cruel” (TD 128) and shares with Angel a fear of life in general. Different backgrounds and experiences of individuals become different causes which lead to the same feeling about life and the world. Rootlessness of Tess contributes to her predicament. For Tess, her rootlessness is related to two aspects, physically and spiritually. Due to historical poverty, Tess is obliged to move to Trantridge to claim kin and work for the imposter Stoke D’urbervilles, where, on an alien land, she suffers from loneliness and what’s more, she is deprived of her virginity which means so much to a girl in the harsh Victorian society. Her social status has fallen into the profound abyss. The sense of guilt haunts her on her life journey, which sinks her into the spiritual plight, in which she suffers and struggles in vain. The severe social conventions do not accept her as a normal person; she is rejected by the society.

“Her sole idea seems to be to shun mankind—or rather that cold accretion called the world.” “A cloud of moral hobgoblins” (TD 91) haunts her. Under the powerful pressures coming from the society and religion, she feels she is the unforgivable sinner who has broken the moral code and social law. “She looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of innocence”. “Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord, she had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such

an anomaly.” (TD 91) Her experience of difficulty-setting makes her understand the cruelty of the world, the injustice of the society. An individual like her is so helpless and hopeless that only the last destination death can bring all the life game to an end. Entrapped in a fear of life in general, she wishes she had not been born in this “blighted” world.

Driven away from home, rejected by society, refused by love and deserted by religion, she has been uprooted physically and spiritually. Tess feels her existence is an offence against the moral codes, the social law and religious creeds. These conflicts are transformed into various pressures, which are woven into an invisible web restricting, controlling and chastening her from body to mind so much that it finally smothers her in predicament. Tess is destined to tragedy. The irreconcilability of her relationship with the society decides her dilemma and her tragic fate. Enveloped in the bewilderment caused by this dilemma, she is searching for the reason “why the sun do shine on the just and unjust alike.” (TD 130) Rootlessness and lostness reflect the typical symptom of the age disease, particularly in spirituality.

5. Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, England was experiencing the seismic social transformation, from the old-fashioned traditional agricultural society to a new modern industrial society. The Industrial Revolution with its overwhelming impetus disintegrated the traditional agriculture and undermined the long-lasting self-contained patriarchal system which rooted in soil. Modernization destructed the old-fashioned agricultural economic mode which directly plunged English peasants into the nightmare of poverty and hardships. The dilemma from the forceful social transition was intensified by a revolution in ideology and philosophy launched by the publication of *The Origin of Species*, whose theory of evolution aggressively challenged the Bible. Victorians’ faith in God began to fade. This new doctrine sent people into the rootless bewilderment and perplexity which disorientated Hardy and his countrymen. Melancholy was overwhelming the world. The social upheavals and life misery alienated Victorians from their familiar way of life; the new ideology denying the existence of God divorced them from their long-cherished religious belief. Full of fears and miseries, the world appeared so cruel and elusive that a pessimistic attitude towards life spontaneously arises in the hearts of the protagonists of the novel. They have the sense of being born in the wrong time and place. This is what Angel calls “the ache of modernism”—the disease of the age, the modern ache, which supplies the reason for Tess’s fear of life and the world. Trapped in the spiritual predicament, drifting between two worlds—the new and the old, the protagonists have the sense of psychic dislocation and alienation, which is a very important historical factor in shaping the tragedy of Tess’s generation.

The tragedy is inevitable in the historical context of the late Victorian Age. Hardy defines “the ache of modernism” as the combination of the prevailing mood of self-consciousness, spiritual alienation from religion, bewilderment and melancholy of the age, the sense of rootless

drift between the old and the new, in the particular period of history of England in which the society of disorder, disharmony and instability produces for this disease of the age the context where no “ology” or “ism” could satisfy emotional needs. Meanwhile, he illustrates various conflicts, contradictions and problems in the late Victorian society—the clash between science and religion, the conflict between individual and society, and the ideological dilemma without Christianity etc. and eventually indicates the historical determination of “the ache of modernism”, which is regarded by many as the price of modernity, the belief crisis, the dismay from disorientation in emotion. All in all, the ache of modernism, as the ache of that age, is the product of history in the special phase; people experiencing it are doomed to tragedy.

Notes

- 1) Douglas Brown, *Thomas Hardy*. London: Longman, 1954. p.65.
- 2) Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan, 1985. p.128.
- 3) Wright Terence, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. London: Macmillan, 1987. p.1
- 4) Wright Terence, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. London: Macmillan, 1987. p.23.
- 5) James Townsted, *The Tragedy of a Life without Christ. Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Volume 10:18, 1997. p.1.
- 6) Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan, 1985. p.158.
- 7) Dale Kramer ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.55-56.
- 8) Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*. London and New York: Longman, 1994. p.171.
- 9) Zhang Zaizhong, *Thomas Hardy—Thoughts and Creation*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research: 1987. p. 168.
- 10) Xu Zhimo, *Proses of Xu Zhimo* Zhejiang press of literature and art: 2000. 168.
- 11) Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*. London and New York: Longman, 1994. p.171.
- 12) Rider Haggard, *Rural England*. New York: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005. p.564.
- 13) Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*. London and New York: Longman, 1994. p.171.
- 14) 15) Douglas Brown, *Thomas Hardy*. London: Longman, 1954. p.35. p. 44.
- 16) 17) Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*. New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc. 1966. p. 260. 264.
- 18) Cox R.D. ed., *Thomas Hardy The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970. p.129.

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(中国青海民族大学外国语学院副教授)