

A Short History of Western Thought;
Or, Jude the Obscure Made Plain

As we all know, candidates for membership in this club are given some two lines on their proposal to list their “Published Writings, if any, with Dates.” The following two proposals are not isolated cases. The distinguished applicant mentions “Multiple scientific papers in national and international medical journals” and then says “See attachments.” The proposal is sent to the membership without the attachments, no doubt a very reasonable economy. Another candidate exhausts the two lines with the titles of two impressive publications, begins a third title, and then simply writes “over” in parentheses. When all of us open the mail and turn the proposal over, the verso is blank. I construe these omissions as Freudian slips — a hint to the candidate, should he somehow become aware of them, that the professional writings he is listing will not cut the mustard here on a Monday night. In other words, when you come with a paper, it must be as an amateur. The gravity of this is not lost on the new member for long. While one must write as an amateur, it doesn’t follow that only amateurs are listening. I intend to ignore this insidious requirement by making an argument in the humanities, which I am paid to teach. My defense will be that my argument will be so broad that any learned journal would instantly reject it. It might just do, perhaps, for a banquet speech to a learned society, where the listeners had been moved by wine and brandy to a place beyond intelligent criticism.

I want to prepare for my argument by briefly honoring the usual requirement, however, and referring to something I know nothing about — biogenetics. Specifically, for the purposes of discovery I want to use a dictum made famous in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, a convert to Darwin’s Origin of Species. Haeckel declared that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In other words, the embryology of an organism repeats the entire evolutionary history of the organism itself. For instance, all mammalian embryos do develop in succession the notochord, a rod of cells that will form the foundation of the axial skeleton; somites, the bumps on the back side of the embryo that will develop into bones and muscles; gill pouches; three sets of kidneys; and a tail extending beyond the anus. While biologists in the twentieth century rejected the idea of a strong one-to-one correspondence between phylogeny and ontogeny, these two nonetheless seem

to be entwined. As one biologist has written, the reason appears to be the immortality of genes. Once well entrenched, genes appear to linger long after they have lost their reason for being.

Haeckel's dictum offers itself as an analogy. In culture now, and not in what culture makes out of nature, there is at least one class of people who repeat in their own individual development the evolution of culture itself. These are not real people but the protagonists of a certain kind of fiction. Because this kind of fiction puts these characters through an education, or Bildung in German, and because Goethe is thought to have written the first of these fictions, they are called, as you may be well aware, Bildungsromans. Tonight I will be taking up three scattered examples: Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen Werther, or The Sorrows of Young Werther, first published in 1774; Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure, which came out in 1895; and finally Their Eyes Were Watching God, the 1937 fiction by the African-American novelist-folklorist-anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston. This is a random selection. In each case the protagonist makes sense of existence in one way but then subsequently in another and may finally be stymied in the attempt to understand existence at all. Such changes may or may not be related to developmental psychology — differences in styles of learning or in age-appropriate tasks. Such changes may or may not be socially enforced, such that these texts serve the purpose of social reproduction. Claims like those of developmental psychology or political science are none of my business tonight. My argument here is simply that these changes in the protagonists of Bildungsromans repeat the evolution of interpretation in the Western world.

From our present viewpoint, making sense of the world — interpreting it — seems to have evolved in three stages. I'll use the term "premodern" to name the first and fix its end point at about 1475 with the invention of movable type, understanding that we do not move from one stage to the next with the decisiveness and unanimity with which we cross a new bridge after someone has cut a ribbon. We see the premodern as Saul Steinberg's famous New Yorker cover in 1976 gave "A View of the World from 9th Avenue": the two blocks to the Hudson River exhaust two thirds of his drawing and are full of buildings, vehicles, and people. Beyond the Hudson is something that looks like a cocoa mat, with Jersey written on its front lip, topped with a couple of protuberances and just a few names like Los Angeles and Chicago in very small letters on its otherwise unbroken surface. Beyond the ribbon labeled the Pacific, the tiny words China, Japan, and Russia are spaced along a thin line of unbroken hills. Similarly, from our own vantage point, beyond the London, Paris, and Florence of the Middle Ages there were of course

the Rome, Alexandria, Athens, and Mycenae of antiquity. These have been increasingly recovered since the Renaissance, with their art and law, rhetoric and drama a matter of significant interest to scholars. But that is all rather like the cocoa mat on the other side of the Hudson. What looms in the premodern world for Western culture are two ideas that were key to medieval interpretation. The first has to do with value, with axiology. The idea is that there is a gradation in the value of beings. Beings not subject to change are superior in being to beings that do change. The simple being is superior to the divided one. One of Anselm's proofs for the existence of God depends on the assumption of such a gradation. Anselm argued that there must be a being greater than which there is no other. The second key idea is that beings or events at a lower order of being can and ought to be understood through reference to their analogues at a superior order of being. So a social hierarchy like those who pray for all, those who fight for all, those who labor for all is interpreted and justified through its analogue at a higher order of being. While the three estates are all at the human level, their analogue takes in higher orders of being: their analogue is the hierarchy of God the uncreated and thus immortal; the angels, who are created, unlike God, but simple and thus immortal; and then human beings, who are both created and mortal. Similarly, the holy trinity can and ought to be used at the human level to explain the structure of the family, with the wife, like the logos, the means by which an idea gets put into practice. Although the word "ontology" was not coined until the eighteenth century, ontological privilege is a good way of describing, I think, what was essential to premodern interpretation: the assumption that there is an intrinsic difference in the value of beings.

When we turn to our three Bildungsromans, each protagonist begins by making sense of the world on that assumption. The protagonist being typically a youth and these novels therefore often being love stories, it will be no surprise that Werther thinks of his desired Charlotte as if she were a higher order of being, an "angel" (189): "'I'm going to see her!' I shout in the morning when I awaken After that, I have no further desires for the whole day. Everything, everything else is swallowed up by that prospect." (59). What is more surprising is that Werther knows she is as good as engaged to a man who happens to be off on a journey but begins by believing he is on an even footing with this Albert (63). He can believe this because, as if it were still the twelfth century, he reads existence in terms of a hierarchy. Early in the novel, lying on the ground, he sees the insects moving through the grass and calls them "das Wimmeln der kleinen Welt," 'a swarming microcosm.' At the same time he feels the presence of the Almighty

in his own soul (7), with the Almighty mirrored microcosmically in the “viele . . . Kräfte,” ‘many powers’ moldering away in him still unused. Long after Albert has returned, Werther, ranging the woods, believes that “the splendid forms of the infinite world” stirred in his soul “allbelebend,” ‘with universal vigor’ (79). In Schopenhauer’s great work, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, published some forty years after Goethe’s novel, Schopenhauer argues that the only reality is will in its various gradations. Werther believes he has his share of it, a microcosm of the macrocosm itself. And thus the first book of the novel ends with Werther undespairing of the possession of Charlotte.

At age eleven, Jude Fawley, the protagonist of Hardy’s novel, is an orphan under the protection of a great aunt, who is the village baker. The story begins when Jude’s scholarly, benevolent schoolmaster, dreaming of becoming a university graduate, leaves for the city of Christminster, the name Hardy gives Oxford, which lies some twenty miles to the north. Jude dreams of this city in a medieval way, calling it the New Jerusalem. So, while he stands on top of a barn, as a mist clears the setting sun fires points of the distant city into topaz until they show themselves as “vanes, windows, wet roof slates It was Christminster, unquestionably, either directly seen, or miraged in the peculiar atmosphere” (20-21). The New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse lifts its towers on a different and higher level of being than the earthly Jerusalem that is merely a figure for it. The Latin, Greek, and Hebrew that the Oxford dons understand indicates a different and superior way of understanding the world. The dons themselves exceed other beings as the soul exceeds the body: “O, they never look at anything that folks like we can understand,” an elderly teamster tells Jude. “ ’Tis all learning there — nothing but learning, except religion. And that’s learning too, for I never could understand it. . . . ’Em lives on a lofty level. . . . As we be here in our bodies on this high ground, so be they in their minds — noble-minded men enough, no doubt” (23-24). For eight years Jude prepares himself to stand for a fellowship, learning Latin well enough to conduct imaginary conversations with himself in Latin, reading two books and more of the Iliad, Christian patristics, and some mathematics. He plans to move to Oxford, supporting himself as a stone mason while he studies the likes of Sophocles in his off hours. Years later, the woman he will fall in love with can tell a woman who is Jude’s former wife, “. . . Christminster is a sort of fixed vision with him, which I suppose he’ll never be cured of believing in. He still thinks it a great centre of high and fearless thought” (295).

In the third of our Bildungsromans, Janie is raised by her grandmother, a former slave. Like Jude's, Janie's parents are gone, but in her case her mother had been raped by a white school teacher, who was never seen again, while the mother herself turned to drink and had also disappeared. On a spring afternoon in West Florida, Janie spends "most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. . . . It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her eyes. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. . . . She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to its tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!" (10-11). Hurston writes at the beginning of this book that "Women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly." (1) When Janie on a spring afternoon sees what a marriage is, she is one of Plato's philosophers, stepping outside the cave to see the eidoi, the patterns by which the mere phenomena of the world are to be identified and judged. Where Augustine placed the eidoi in the mind of God, the superhuman, Janie puts it in the infrahuman, a plant, but it has no less normative force.

It isn't to be thought that premodern thinking — the assignment of ontological privilege and the hierarchies that go with it — disappeared with modernity. Raymond Williams called such phenomena "residual," by contrast with what come to dominate a new social formation. It isn't eccentric, I think, to date the social formation of modernity from the invention of printing. As a result of printing, a very appreciable fraction of people in the Western world came to be socialized by reading to a very appreciable degree. But surely other origins can be argued for. What seems to be less debatable is that the dominant way of making sense of the world in modernity is explanation. By explanation, we make sense of something by adducing its causes. Causality was familiar within the scholasticism of the premodern world, but it comprised Aristotle's four causes, and none of them — not even what Aristotle called the efficient cause —

is the causality that dominates modern thought. Modern causality is, of course, the confirmable relationship between a dependent variable and a set of independent ones, its necessary and sufficient conditions. The dominance of explanation in this sense has held good for the social sciences as well as the natural ones. Leopold von Ranke's insisted that historians must attend to archival particulars. But this merely equated with Francis Bacon's point in the Novum Organum that the indispensable means for "searching into and discovering truth" is deriving axioms "from the senses and particulars." Even in history, where replication does not seem to be possible, explanation became normative. For example, Macaulay summarizes thus von Ranke's project in The Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome: "How it was that Protestantism did so much, yet did no more, how it was that the Church of Rome, having lost a large part of Europe, not only ceased to lose, but actually regained nearly half of what she had lost" Bacon himself had written a History of Henry VII in which he attempted to draw out the reasons for events. The opposite of inquiring into what has caused something is inquiring into what something causes, or pragmatism, derived from the Greek word for work. The modern way of making sense of the world is seeing how the world actually works.

Each of the protagonists of our sample Bildungsromans discovers to his or her grief how the world works. I know of no Bildungsroman that predates modernity, and the reason for that — to speak in the modern way — is that there is no development that doesn't involve at least this second way of thinking. Thus in the Bildungsroman the vertical axis of being and value is rotated ninety degrees. Beings are horizontalized, so to speak, placed with what they do on the temporal plane of earlier and later, cause and effect. However much the protagonist may love some of them, they become tested for their workability in the world.

About halfway through The Sorrows of Younger Werther, Werther writes two letters in succession that make an intriguing pair. In the first Werther acknowledges a letter from Charlotte's new husband Albert telling Werther that the two of them are now married. In reply, Werther writes to Albert, "I know that I'm with you, too, that I'm in Lotte's heart without any detriment to you; yes, I'm in second place there, and I will and must retain that place. Oh, I'd go raving mad if she could forget — " (105). The second letter, written to Werther's friend Wilhelm, is lengthy but seems scarcely relevant to the relationship between Werther and Charlotte. Werther is relating a visit to the home of his noble patron for lunch. This happens to be on the day that a noble company of ladies and gentlemen assemble at the Count's house in the

afternoon; and a walk and conversation between Werther and the Count mean that Werther is still there when the “Herrn und Frauen” begin to arrive. Werther, like Goethe himself, is not well born, and this soon registers on the company, who begin whispering. The Count notes regretfully to Werther “unsere wunderbaren Verhältnisse,” ‘our peculiar ways,’ and Werther instantly volunteers to leave. Werther is enraged to learn next day that the news that the Count had to ask him to leave has spread through the city. (104-11). The fact is that predictability relates not simply to physical matters but also of course to agreements among people about how they will respond to events. What we mean by “convention.” This example of the way the world works, this snub, Werther indignantly shrugs off. And he returns to Charlotte’s village, hoping that she loves him, concentrating, for instance, on the first time she calls him “lieber Werther” (138). His passion for her builds immoderately, desperately. But she responds, “. . . Why me, Werther? Why me, when I belong to another man? This, and nothing else?” (165). Werther believes he is a better man than Albert but sees Charlotte wholly in the grip of convention. And in a few days he will have shot himself to death.

We left Jude moving to Oxford at age nineteen, supporting himself as an ecclesiastical mason, still thinking of the city as “the intellectual and spiritual granary of [his] country” (106). But it occurs to him that he should consider facts a little more closely. Should consider, that is, how this particular world works. “What was the good, after all, of using up his spare hours in a vague labour called ‘private study’ without giving an outlook on practicabilities?” (107) And so he makes it a point to observe on the street the heads of the various colleges and settles upon five whose expressions “seemed to say to him that they were appreciative and far-seeing men.” (108) He writes the five, but none answers for a long while. In the meantime, making inquiries about competing for scholarships, he concludes that he would never be able to compete with those who had passed their lives under trained teachers (109). The alternative is simply buying his way in. At his present rate of saving, however, that would take fifteen years. He has already concluded that he has been a fool when the single response to his five inquiries arrives. It is very brief: “I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do.” (111).

To return to our third young person, Janie, whom we left in the spring grass, watching the intercourse of bee and blossom, suffused in the sweet pollen of possibility. She too gets some advice. Under the spell of the pear tree, she is caught kissing a boy by her Grandma, who has already been approached about Janie by a much older man, a man who does, however, own a house, a mule, and sixty acres; and Grandma determines that Janie will marry him. Janie demurs, thinking he looks “like some ole skullhead in de grave yard” (15). But her grandma, this old ex slave, insists, first slapping Janie, then comforting her and giving her this counsel: “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. . . . ’Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection.” (14)

Having heard from Grandma the way one part of the world works, Janie soon learns another, “that marriage didn’t make love” (24) So she is ripe for the citified, stylishly dressed man, “kind of portly like rich white folks” (32), walking down the road past Logan’s house, who pauses to ask for a glass of water. Her own grandmother, in effect, has set Janie up for what this man wants. He says he’s been making money working for white people in Atlanta. “But when he heard all about ’em makin’ a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin’.” (27). So Janie the next morning goes south with him in Florida, marries him, and shortly finds herself in a settlement where her husband Jody puts his capital to work. He acquires a franchise to a post office which he establishes as a general store, buys and resells land, purchases the first gaslight for the first street, is almost immediately elected mayor, and builds a large white house for him and Janie that makes the other houses in Eatonville, as it is called, look like workers’ quarters. While he and Janie prosper, however, their marriage doesn’t, for he is sexually jealous of her and jealous too of her gifts of intelligence and language. Consequently he typically makes her leave the porch of the store, where people gather in the evenings, and go inside to wait on customers or keep the accounts, until, as Janie

thinks, their marriages leaves the bedroom and goes into the parlor, where appearances are kept up. After a terrible quarrel they sleep apart, and, having ignored Janie's wishes that he see a doctor, Jody is dying of kidney disease. On his last day, she finally speaks her mind, telling him what she has discovered about the workings of a marriage: "Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me. . . . Now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain't tried tuh pacify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice." (82).

I break off the stories of Werther, Jude, and Janie for a moment to bring my ludicrously foreshortened history of the West down to the present. It will seem to you only a little less ludicrously foreshortened when I remind you that this is simply a history of hermeneutics — of the dominant ways that educated people have gone about making sense of the world. I should think that the premodern way of doing this would have been boringly familiar to you. The idea that some beings have more of being in them than other beings, and that a vertical or hierarchized view of existence follows from that fact, would seem close to a commonplace — but, of course, perhaps debatable for that very reason. The same with my version of the centrality of cause and effect to modern interpretation. Close to a commonplace, perhaps. With the postmodern, however, I think there is no such agreement, partly because, if postmodernity exists, we are in the middle of it. I will take the position that the definitive interpretative style of postmodernity is suspicion. Simply to quote Paul Ricoeur's famous phrase from the 1960s, "the hermeneutics of suspicion," should be enough to emphasize that this position is certainly not original with me. People and characters worthy of suspicion have been around for a long time, of course. But this is not the suspicion of postmodernity, which has to do, not with the utterances of particular persons, but finally with the reliability of language in itself.

Materialism is suspicious of discourse. From a materialist viewpoint, classes are formed in struggle over the surplus product. Arguably the genders and the races are formed in struggle over a product as well. Ideas are produced in the course of these struggles and thus no idea is innocent in its birth. A book entitled The German Ideology takes this view. It was written by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels between September 1845 and the summer of 1846, and if postmodernity exists, that may be as good a year as any for dating its origin. "The class which

has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” In the famous phrase of Jacques Derrida’s, there is nothing outside the text, nothing by which we can replace discourse as ideology with discourse as a transparent representation of the truth. We cannot twirl the knob and find some nonideological language to listen to or read, and we cannot jump out of our skins and stand outside ideology as writers. All language is suspect as ideological.

If we are not always conscious of the force and thrust of our language as it relates to class, gender, or race, this force and thrust is unconscious for us only in the sense that we may not be thinking of it. But Freud showed that there are also ideas that are repressed — that are dynamically unconscious. Unconscious processes of the mind like condensation and displacement censor what we can become aware of. Language became suspect a second time when it was understood to be organized not only around conscious intentions but, for those who knew how to conduct the reorganization, around unconscious desires as well. Not only the accounts we give of our dreams fell under suspicion but everything else we say or write where we have a measure of independence — poetry and fiction, for instance.

However different the transformations worked by Marx and Freud in the history of interpretation, the suspicion they created still fell about the users of language, not upon language itself. With the work of such great twentieth-century students of language as Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, however, language itself is called into question as an instrument of truth. Because language comes to us as a social endowment, where our scope for novelty is very limited, we cannot use it without being subject to its semantic instability and the semantic structures that lend themselves only imperfectly to what anyone might intend. Take the writing of history, for example, where, presumably, at least some historians intend to write truthfully. Much, perhaps all history is narrative — story, so to speak. Hayden White has maintained that most if not all historical writing, exactly because it is narrative, necessarily falls into one or the other of the principal narrative genres of the West — tragedy, comedy, romance, or the like. If that is so, then the very instrument for transmitting the truth of the past must modify the past that is being transmitted.

At this point you will raise an objection, because you see where this argument is headed. He has been proposing, you will think, that the chief character of a novel of development repeats the successively dominant ways in which the Western world interpreted its world. But Jude and Janie are the creations of realist and modernist authors respectively. Isn't it anachronistic to read any sign of postmodernity into these texts? Much less into The Sorrows of Young Werther, which was written in the eighteenth century? And I concede the point to a degree.

But where older forms of skepticism asked us how we can be certain of our knowledge of the physical world, the postmodern seems, in an important way, to leave us in a position of undecidability about the social world. So for the Marxist, for example, the literary text is written within two histories — the history of other literary texts and of literary conventions, but also the history of economic and political interests, in which authors like everyone else occupy interested positions. The histories cannot be resolved into each other, and the literary text necessarily remains in tension between both. So for psychoanalysis, it would seem, the neurotic symptom and therefore the literary text occupy a position of uncertainty, an aesthetic object on the one hand, to be judged as such, but on the other a compromise that gratifies unconscious desire in author and reader alike, undecidably pointing back to the infancy of both but also pointing forward to the culture of the future that the text is helping to make. And for deconstruction, Rousseau, writing on the origin of music, for instance, cannot show that it originates in the south in melody without also showing that it originates in the north in harmony. Such is the way that language does not give itself over to what we want to do with it. Such is the undecidability of postmodernity. And I want to conclude by pointing out that all three of our examples of the Bildungsroman end by raising a suggestion of the undecidable, as if there was already within them an emergence of the age to come.

For Werther, his whole soul had hung on the form, the voice, the demeanor of his Charlotte (27). “How I fed my gaze on her dark eyes . . . ,” he had written to his friend Wilhelm. “How those lively lips and fresh, alert cheeks allured my whole soul!” (31). After Werther has returned to the village of Charlotte and her husband, Charlotte and Werther, unexpectedly alone, embrace desperately and passionately, and then Werther, certain that she loves him but certain as well that he will never possess her, borrows a pair of pistols from the husband and destroys himself. On her husband's instruction, Charlotte herself had taken the pistols down from the wall and given them to Werther's servant, after which she had gone “to her room in a state of the

most indescribable uncertainty” (195), “dem Zustande der unaussprechlichsten Ungewißheit,” uncertainty in Charlotte where there is none in Werther, who has been intending his death for a long while. But uncertainty enters the text in a more profound and interesting way. Goethe revised the 1774 version of his Bildungsroman for a new edition in 1787, especially expanding the section of the second and last book where a fictitious editor has taken over. Werther has killed himself. The novel to that point had simply comprised Werther’s own letters. After his death an editor must construct the story of Werther’s last days, splicing into it all the letters that remain. On the factual details of events, all his informants agree, the editor says. On the matter of everyone’s motives, however, uncertainty reigns: “Only on the way of thinking of the various people involved do opinions diverge and are judgments divided.” The editor reports that he finds himself inserting “the slightest little note, “[e]specially since it so difficult to discover the true, deep-seated motives of even a single action when it occurs among people who are not of a common stamp” (149).

For Jude Fawley, there is no uncertainty, only ruefulness, when he finally assesses the effects of poverty on the chances that a self-educated, self-sacrificing man of his generation might somehow join the parade of scarlet- and black-clad Oxford dons entering the Sheldonian Theater. He figures out before very long, that is, how Oxford works. What do leave him vastly uncertain are his many attempts to discover how Sue Bridehead works. I have given you no clue so far that a very great deal of Jude the Obscure concerns Jude’s desire for his first cousin Sue, like him an orphan, whom he first meets soon after he arrives in Oxford, who, the first time they are close, “looked right into his face with liquid, untranslatable eyes, that combined, or seemed to him to combine, keenness with tenderness, and mystery with both” (85). Where Jude is pious, Sue, who earns her living through ecclesiastical lettering, nevertheless buys explicitly erotic classical statuary. She can write to Jude passionately; but in the same way that she lived with a male undergraduate for many months but denied him sexual intercourse, she will do the same with Jude. Out of guilt for the deaths of three children, she will return to a husband whom she physically abhors and has never slept with, invoking as the reason for her return a conventional Christianity that she has already persuaded Jude away from. She is narcissistic and never convinces Jude that she returns his love. But she does not, perhaps because she cannot, leave him alone, and it is no wonder that he thinks of her as perverse. She is sometimes his child, sometimes they are like two men together, for she identifies herself with her father, an artist who

worked in metals. She believes women can live without sex; but Hardy, who uses a quotation from Sappho as the epigraph for one part of his book, may have in the back of his mind that he has created a sapphist, a lesbian, who in having repressed her desires for those of her own sex has repressed all of sexuality itself. Whatever else she is, she is the death of Jude, in a sequence of events there is no space here to go into. And she is the occasion for him of a vast uncertainty. His single great public success in Oxford is a barroom speech where he begins his peroration thus: “And what I appear, a sick and poor man, is not the worst of me. I am in a chaos of principles — groping in the dark — acting by instinct and not after example. Eight or nine years ago when I came here first, I had a neat stock of fixed opinions, but they dropped away one by one; and the further I get the less sure I am.” (311).

Their Eyes Were Watching God, the last of our three, would seem by contrast to end in great contentment. But suspiciously great — coming after a prolonged moment of mindless hatred that the novel would seem to wish to limit and contain by disjoining it from anything else. Janie, you will recall (and this is the last time I shall have to tax your memory), is left a widow of means after the death from liver disease of her second husband, Jody. Within weeks she is being courted by a tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted day laborer twelve years her junior who goes fishing with her, teaches her to shoot and play checkers, and takes pleasure in combing her luxuriant hair. “He looked like the love thoughts of women,” Hurston writes. “He could be a bee to a blossom — a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps.” (101). His name is Vergible Woods, but everyone calls him Tea Cake. And so, conquering her worry that he is playing her for a fool, she marries him and goes south with him, working side by side with him on the muck on the shore of Okechobee, picking beans, hunting small game, dancing and singing at night, and making a sweet love heightened just occasionally by jealousy. Their life together ends after two years. A hurricane drives the migrant workers off the muck towards Palm Beach, but not before the lake breaks through its dike. Like Tea Cake, Janie is in the water and, growing exhausted, grabs the tail of a terrified cow. A dog — a rabid one, as matters turn out — has already taken refuge on the cow’s back and menaces Janie. Tea Cake swims to her rescue, kills the dog with his knife, but not before being bitten on the cheek. A month later, back in the ’Glades, working on the cleanup Tea Cake comes down with a fever. As his symptoms worsen, he sleeps with a revolver under his pillow and madly believes Janie has not been treating him well. The moment comes when he tries to

kill her. He brings the revolver up unsteadily but quickly and levels it at her breast. “The pistol snapped once. Instinctively Janie’s hand flew behind her [to a] rifle and brought it round. Most likely this would scare him off. If only the doctor would come! If anybody at all would come! She broke the rifle deftly and shoved in the shell as the second click told her that Tea Cake’s suffering brain was urging him on to kill. . . . He steadied himself against the jamb of the door and Janie thought to run into him and grab his arm, but she saw the quick motion of taking aim and heard the click. Saw the ferocious look in his eyes and went mad with fear as she had done in the water that time. She threw up the barrel of the rifle in frenzied hope and fear. Hope that he’d see it and run, desperate fear for her life. . . . He paid no more attention to the pointing gun than if it were Janie’s dog finger. She saw him stiffen himself all over as he leveled and took aim. The fiend in him must kill and Janie was the only living thing he saw. The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. . . . Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms. . . . They came down heavily like that. Janie struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake’s teeth from her arm. It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake’s head in her lap.” (174-75). Janie gives him a lavish funeral and in due course returns to Eatonville and the two-story house and speaks to her closest woman friend with satisfaction: “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain’t so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo’ Tea Cake come along. It’s full uh thoughts, ’specially dat bedroom.” (182)

I want to emphasize with this wonderful book what isn’t often foregrounded. Janie understands herself as a success and there is no uncertainty in her. She had tried her Grandma’s way. But with Tea Cake is was “no business proposition.” It was “uh love game” (108). Hurston nevertheless leaves a remainder of uncertainty, perhaps intentionally, perhaps not. The rabid Tea Cake is a second Tea Cake. But the Janie mad with fear is no less a second Janie, with Hurston’s allusion to Janie’s dog finger assimilating her to the rabid dog itself. Does the novel succeed in leaving the relationship between the first couple intact because the second couple is sufficiently disjunct from the first? How does Janie’s moment as a scared human being fighting for its life qualify her sacrificing self? No certain answer suggests itself, leaving a rupture in this

Bildungsroman. This seems worth remarking, when the most fundamental feature of a novel of development may well be the absence of crisis or turning point.

After Max Weber, Norbert Elias was perhaps the greatest social scientist of the last century. In The Civilizing Process, Elias observed that “the specific psychological process of ‘growing up’ in Western societies . . . is nothing other than the individual civilizing process to which each young person, as a result of the social civilizing process over many centuries, is automatically subjected from earliest childhood, to a greater or lesser degree and with greater or lesser success. The psychogenesis of the adult make-up in civilized society cannot, therefore, be understood if considered independently of the sociogenesis of our ‘civilization.’” Tonight I have simply streamlined what Elias calls the “sociogenesis of our ‘civilization’” into a succession of three dominant hermeneutic modes. These three are what I have crudely called premodern, modern, and postmodern ways of making sense of the world. Or more exactly, in the case of the postmodern sometimes, not making sense of the world. The only point that may be original here is my belief that, in the protagonist of the Bildungsroman, we have a stylized version of what appears to us as the journey of Western culture itself.

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