

“A Sigh of Sympathy”: Thomas Hardy’s Paralinguistic Aesthetics and Evolutionary Sympathy

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THIS essay turns on a quiet, though intriguing, expression—the sigh—and considers the aesthetic work that it performs in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Studies of Hardy’s representation of music have acknowledged the conceptual and aesthetic significance of voice tone, cadence, and pitch in his writing.¹ This attention has not yet extended to specific forms of paralinguistic expression, despite the many variants of nonlexical expression in his novels. While the primary focus of the essay is the aesthetic, communicative, and biological functions of the sigh itself, the broader imperative is to demonstrate how paralinguistic expression was implicated in broader nineteenth-century debates about evolution. It does this by setting Hardy’s sighs in conversation with Herbert Spencer’s essay “The Origin and Function of Music” (1857), in which Spencer proposed that highly developed humans are able to aurally perceive and respond sympathetically to the emotionally heightened paralinguistic expressions of others. Hardy’s writing dramatizes a comparable associative relationship between paralinguistic expression, listening, and sympathy to that which Spencer proposed in “The Origin,” but does not replicate the ideological conditions of Spencer’s model, which had reserved the highest forms of sympathy for the “cultivated” few. Hardy’s sustained interest in the sigh, I argue, is more overtly related to how the biosemiotics of paralinguistic expression communicate insights into emotional conditions that are outside the grasp of language.

The influence of sympathy on Hardy’s novels has recently been subject to critical recovery.² I seek to develop this work by attending to Hardy’s exploration of sympathy’s workings (and failures) through the aesthetic operations of paralinguistic expression. By attending to nonlexical expression, the essay establishes an original way of thinking about how the aesthetics of Hardy’s novels are part of his participation in debates about

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evolutionary development and, by implication, what is to be valued in human nature and behavior.

The essay is organized around readings of key scenes of sighing—passages where Hardy seems to linger over the aesthetics of this expression—in three of his major novels: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), *The Return of the Native* (1878), and *The Woodlanders* (1887). Woven through these readings is a consideration of how Hardy's representation of the sigh both engages with and departs in meaningful ways (tacitly or otherwise) from Spencer's ideological model, and how this participation is realized primarily on an aesthetic level. By invoking elements of these evolutionary ideas in his fiction, Hardy's novels engage with issues of class and inheritance without being beholden to the terms of these evolutionary debates. The paralinguistic aesthetics evident in his novels do not reveal a direct line of influence from Spencer to Hardy; whereas Hardy's novels probe the problem of sympathy, his writing does not instrumentalize fellow-feeling as a marker or justification of social division. Instead, I argue, Hardy gestures towards an ironic countermodel of cultivated sympathy, one that signals his commitment to developing a model of sympathy through an egalitarian standard.

1. HARDY, SPENCER, AND THE NATURE OF A SIGH

Before beginning in earnest, it is worth briefly defending the decision to consider sighing under the umbrella of “paralanguage,” given that the term and area of study was only devised in the 1950s by linguist George L. Trager. While neither Hardy nor Spencer had access to the term “paralanguage,” or to an organized discipline of paralinguistic study, both figures demonstrate a sustained interest in tone, cadence, pitch, and loudness—all of which have since been schematized as part of linguistic models of paralanguage. In contemporary linguistic study, these vocalic modulations have been foregrounded as elementary to the paralinguistic qualities of the sigh. In *Paralanguage*, linguist Fernando Poyatos characterizes the sigh physiologically, as a “variably prolonged ingress of respiratory air . . . followed immediately by a longer egression,” that has been explained “as responding to an involuntary stimulation of respiration by lung receptors.” Significantly, Poyatos also acknowledges that the sigh can act as an “eloquent paralinguistic message-conveying utterance.”³ Whether produced voluntarily or involuntarily, the sigh often indicates heightened emotion, and “the eloquence of a sigh is always there in one degree or another,” he argues.⁴ The meaningfulness of

a sigh’s message is altered through pitch and intensity (perceived loudness), so that when a sigh follows or precedes a verbal message, it can override the linguistic element of such a communication.

Indicating Hardy’s own alertness to the “eloquence” of paralanguage, Poyatos quotes directly from *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* while discussing how a sigh’s intensity can modify its intended or perceived meaningfulness. Poyatos describes this “word-like, perhaps ineffable, breathing behaviour” and refers to the inconclusive signification of Alec D’Urberville’s sigh after Tess confirms that she can never love him, and in response Alec emits “a laboured breath, as if the scene were getting rather oppressive to his heart, or to his conscience, or to his gentility.”⁵ Poyatos’s reference to the quotation is in passing, and I would add that the conjunction that precedes the sigh—“as if”—is a suggestive one. It implies that the full meaning of Alec’s sigh remains undeciphered by the narrator, and perhaps even Alec himself is unable to fully account for its significance; the passage does not resolve whether Tess’s admission strikes an uncomfortable blow to Alec’s “heart,” his “conscience,” his “gentility,” or all three. More than once Hardy remarks on how a sigh has a distinct “nature.” In *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), for instance, Sergeant Troy adds “a sigh which had as much archness in it as a sigh could possess without losing its nature altogether.”⁶ Here, the sigh almost extends over the threshold of its own type and becomes something else entirely, thus implying that a sigh has something of its own intrinsic logic or ontology. As this example suggests, the nature of the sigh is a subtle one, and Hardy registers an aesthetic interest in discerning what constitutes this nature, as well as what marks the sigh as different to other expressions such as gasping, sobbing, or groaning. The subtle elusiveness that often (perhaps paradoxically) distinguishes the sigh seems particularly intriguing for Hardy and is an aspect I will explore in more detail further along in the essay.

For the moment, I want to consider another scene from *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, when the dairymaids of Talbothays Dairy have retired to their shared bedroom to discuss, and sigh over, their youthful longing for Angel Clare. In this passage, the transmissive quality of the sigh precipitates a kind of sympathy between the milkmaids. Close attention to the particular aesthetics of this sympathy, I want to suggest, discloses echoes of Spencer’s theory of musical evolution. “One sighed,” Hardy writes,

and another sighed, and Marian’s plump figure sighed biggest of all. Somebody in bed hard by sighed too. Tears came into the eyes of Retty

Priddle, the pretty red-haired youngest—the last bud of the Paridelles, so important in the county annals. They watched silently a little longer, their three faces still close together as before, and the triple hues of their hair mingling.⁷

The placement of the commas in the first sentence of the passage separate each of the four dairymaid's sighs into discrete utterances—what we might think of as individual units of feeling, as if to suggest that each girl's earnest pining for Angel Clare is interiorized to the point that such conditions of longing cannot possibly be shared. The commas appear to isolate the girls' emotional states. Yet at the same time, Hardy's deep attentiveness to the cadence of language creates a movement across and between the commas. The repetition of "sighed"—this deeply sibilant word—generates a pulse within the syntax, an undertow of rhythm that also draws the reader's attention toward other prose-rhythmic strategies at play. The first word, "one," is partially echoed in "another," which merges with the "and" that precedes it by way of the repeated "an" sounds, mingling the two vowel sounds. The initiating sibilance of "sighed" is then reversed in "tears" and "eyes," meaning this sibilance has a more enduring sonic effect, almost as though the accumulation of shared sighs has a more sustained effect on Retty Priddle's emotional state and brings her to tears. The aesthetics of *form* interact and intersect with the *matter* of this moment: the prose-rhythm elements of the passage create an undertow that disrupts the commas' grammatical function to circumscribe each girl's wistful sigh.

Hardy's attention to the sigh and its relation to sympathy reflect a more general association between human nonverbal communication and sympathy in scientific inquiry at the time. A key figure in these debates, and well known to Hardy, was Herbert Spencer. The associative link that Hardy draws between the accumulation of sighs and the production of sympathy between the milkmaids has affinities with the argument Spencer had presented in his 1857 essay on musical evolution, "The Origin and Function of Music." Hardy was familiar with the specifics of Spencer's theory. He owned a copy of *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative* (1858), a miscellany of Spencer's less classifiable works in which "The Origin" (originally published in *Fraser's Magazine*) had been reprinted.⁸ In "The Origin," Spencer had asserted that as instinctive responses to unusual events, all displays of strong feeling are the result of muscular reactions that affect the "*loudness, quality or timbre, pitch, intervals, and rate of variation*" (italics original) of the voice, writing that these

“variations of the voice are the physiological results of variations of feeling.”⁹ Though Spencer did not specifically identify sighing as one of these differentials, the postscript in his later 1890 version of the article, which was prepared for an updated edition of the *Essays*, concludes with an intriguing quotation from Emily Gerard’s travelogue *The Land beyond the Forest* (1888). Spencer quotes Gerard’s metaphorical description of the movement of an *adagio*, which opens “with a slow rhythmical movement: it is a sighing and longing of unsatisfied aspirations; a craving for undiscovered happiness.”¹⁰ For both Gerard and Spencer, it seems, the sigh conveys an emotional expressiveness that indicates its close proximity to, if not direct participation in, the economy of vocal changes linked with strong emotion.

Both Charles Darwin and Spencer had offered theories on the evolutionary origins of music, and these theories became the touchstone for ensuing debates on the subject in the nineteenth century. The theory Spencer proposed in “The Origin” conflicted with Darwin’s popular hypothesis, which held that animal music (such as birdsong) had developed in order to assist with mate selection and reproduction.¹¹ Such was the preeminent influence of their conflicting theories that the *British Quarterly Review* felt compelled to apostrophize that “there are, as is well known, two leading theories with regard to the origin of music—Mr. Darwin’s and Mr. Spencer’s.”¹² Following Darwin, psychologist Edmund Gurney took issue with Spencer’s theory in his 1876 “On Some Disputed Points in Music.” Gurney made a searing evaluation of Spencer, writing: “On not one of these heads does he seem to me to succeed in making his case.” Transcribing this passage from Gurney’s article into his notebook, Hardy annotated the passage with a terse rejoinder nestled in square brackets: “[no: M^r S. is right].”¹³ In doing so, Hardy signaled his firm support for Spencer’s conviction that music had developed from the rhythm and emotionally expressive contours of paralanguage.

The sympathy between the milkmaids in *Tess* is precipitated by their listening to each other’s sighs, which indicates Hardy’s alertness to another key aspect of Spencer’s theory: namely, that *listening* to vocal modulations can stimulate sympathy. When “strong” emotion causes an alteration in another person’s voice, Spencer had argued, the listener associates this vocal shift with their own experience of strong emotion, which can prompt sympathetic identification. Thus, for Spencer, “these various modifications of voice become not only a language through which we understand the emotions of others, but also the means of

exciting our sympathy with such emotions” (400). The specific act of *listening* to vocal modifications is central to generating the shared state of sympathy: “these modifications of voice produced by feelings . . . enable the hearer not only to *understand* the state of mind they accompany, but to *partake* of that state” (407). Similarly, in Hardy’s expression a single sigh stimulates a reflexive effect on the listener, prompting a reciprocal sighed response. That is to say, the first milkmaid’s sigh seems to directly activate the second, which then prompts the third, and so on, thus emphasizing how the girls’ emotional states are both separate and shared—an idea further suggested by their physical closeness and the “mingling” of their hair. The act of listening to one sigh induces another, the sympathetic transference produced specifically through the milkmaids’ aural responsiveness to one another, which signals a mode of sympathy that is both cumulative and mimetic.

2. CULTIVATING SYMPATHY

While there are intriguing affinities between the associative links that Hardy draws between paralanguage, sympathy, listening, and the Spencerian model that he admired, these qualities do not equate to a simple mapping of Spencer’s theory onto Hardy’s writing. Roger Ebbatson has suggested that “the imprint of Spencer may be traced in several aspects of Hardy’s fiction.”¹⁴ Yet Hardy’s fiction does not amount to a distillation of Spencerian thinking, and neither is this “imprint” fully realized in the working of Hardy’s paralinguistic aesthetics. Underpinning Spencer’s model was an ideological conviction that only the highest classes of society were capable of the most developed forms of sympathy, and this principle is simply not borne out in Hardy’s fiction. As John Glendening notes, “in Hardy’s world it is generally not the lower class that blocks positive, humane forces nor rigorously maintains social restraint.”¹⁵ When sympathy fails in Hardy’s narratives (which it often does), the responsibility for this failure is not presumed—as it is in Spencer’s writing—on a naturalized sense that the lower classes have a less acute sense of sympathy than those of a higher social standing.

Spencer had articulated this hierarchical vision of sympathy by arguing that “feelings of higher and more complex kinds”—in other words, the higher and more complex kinds of sympathy—were “as yet experienced only by the cultivated few.” Within the parameters of his theoretical model, this meant that modifications of the voice did not produce sympathetic responsiveness in *all* listeners. While paralanguage (and

indeed lower forms of sympathy) might be a trait shared between animals, infants, and men, the “higher” stage of sympathetic identification and its altruistic effect was reserved for humans of a “civilized,” “developed,” or “cultivated” sensibility. Though Spencer predicted that evolutionary progress would eventually lead to an increase in sympathy across a broader social demographic, this vision of universal human progress was a future yet to be realized. As he writes in “The Origin”:

[D]o we not find among different classes of the same nation, differences that have like implications? The gentleman and the clown stand in decided contrast with respect to variety of intonation. Listen to the conversation of a servant-girl, and then to that of a refined lady, and the more delicate and complex changes of voice used by the latter will be conspicuous. Now, without going so far as to say that out of all the differences of culture to which the upper and lower classes are subjected, difference of musical culture is that to which alone this difference of speech is ascribable; yet we may fairly say that there seems a much more obvious connexion of cause and effect between these than between any others. (407)

Here, Spencer consolidates the contrast between the “lower emotions” of the working classes and “higher emotions” of genteel society in terms of access to musical culture. In “Developed Music,” published in *Facts and Comments* (1902), he further observed that “we may recognize a contrast between the music of coarse exhilaration and the music of refined exhilaration.” In social spaces frequented by the working classes such as music halls, “arrangements of ugly musical phrases yield an effect attractive to the uncultured: musical doggerel, we may call it.” The “developed” music that Spencer lauds as evidence of humanity’s capacity for higher progress, “Cherubini’s overtures and many of Mozart’s sonatas,” was only to be heard in the concert halls by civilized members of society.¹⁶

The taxonomy of aesthetic response that Spencer outlines in these observations of musical style and performance served an ideological function, separating the moral wheat from the immoral chaff within a scientific framework. It is also symptomatic of the deep entanglement of aesthetic taste with civil and moral development that had been inaugurated in the eighteenth century, here presented with the certainty of science.¹⁷ In nineteenth-century thinking, “taste,” or a refined aesthetic sensibility, “was the mark of moral cultivation and social bonding.”¹⁸ In this ideological model, the highest forms of sympathy were contingent on the cultivated aesthetic responsiveness of the most highly developed of humans. The higher forms of sympathy were, for Spencer, partially predicated on refined aural awareness—an element of his thinking

that underlines his observations on the difference in musical taste between the higher and lower classes. There is often a conflation in Spencer's thinking between genetic characteristics that are biologically inherited and cultural experience that is socially derived, one that there is not space here to fully disentangle. However, suffice it to say that if, as Spencer had suggested in *The Data of Ethics* (1879), those who "care nothing about the feelings of other people are, by implication, shut out from a wide range of aesthetic pleasures," then the converse was also true to an extent: those without a refined aesthetic sensibility were prone to a less acute sympathy and vice versa.¹⁹ For Spencer, the most developed forms of sympathy were considered generative, as well as a sign, of both cultivation and morality, and therefore linked the two together. In this virtuous circle, Spencerian sympathy thus becomes conceptually centralized to the idea of cultivation in both a moral and an aesthetic sense.

The broader evolutionary principle behind Spencer's scaled vision of society and culture was the Great Chain of Being—a hierarchical organization of the natural world from the lowest rudimentary forms of life to its apogee in man, which offered a confirmation of human supremacy and acted as a salve against the inherent randomness, chance, and uncertainty of Darwin's evolutionary system.²⁰ Pam Morris describes how Spencer "accounted for the divisions of wealth, employment, and status in society purely in terms of gradation of the different social classes upon a biological evolutionary scale." The Great Chain itself was often translated into a sociological register in order to suit such ideological posturing, in an effort to deny "the poor, along with other races and women, the capacity for a fully human nature, now understood as the interiority of sensibility."²¹ The logic of this scaled vision of human society was made explicit in Spencer's account of cultivated sympathy, wherein the unsympathetic "cruelty of the barbarous" and the sympathetic "humanity of the civilised" were divided in terms of race and class. Again, Spencer seems to synthesize hereditary characteristics with aesthetic experience, by suggesting that while the capacity for sympathy is partly biologically inherited, the effects of aesthetic culture can contribute to the cultivation of sympathy.

Whereas Hardy clearly found Spencer's evolutionary theory of musical origins persuasive, his aesthetics do not reproduce the neat correlation Spencer drew between class, cultivation, and fellow-feeling. Before developing this claim through readings of *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, I want to briefly return to the scene in *Tess* wherein

Hardy appears to ascribe this "higher" sympathetic facility to the dairymaids. Signifiers of the agricultural laboring-classes, the sensuality and "rough" manners of the dairymaids would fall far short of the refined sensibility on which Spencer's highest form of sympathy was predicated. Alert to the terms of the debate with which he is engaging, Hardy draws the reader's attention to Retty Priddle's genealogical descent as "the last bud of the Paridelles, so important in the county annals." The Paridelles, a once noble family since fallen into economic decline and now working the land they once owned, serves as a doubling motif with Tess's own ancestral history from D'Urberville to Durbeyfield. The degeneration of once "cultivated" houses serves as an inversion of the teleology of Spencer's evolutionary model and invests a sense of irony to the passage.

This ironic inversion of evolutionary teleology extends to the mode of sympathy that develops out of the accumulation of the milkmaids' sighs, where each milkmaid listens to, identifies emotionally with, and responds in kind to the sigh. Hardy dramatizes a sympathy among the working and laboring classes that echoes the kind that Spencer had proposed but takes place precisely along the margin of society that Spencer considered too coarse for such advanced sensibility. There seems a further indirect allusion to the kinds of evolutionary ideas circulated by Spencer when the mode of writing hastily resolves into indirect discourse as Tess considers her own exceptionality in decidedly Spencerian terms; "being more finely formed, better educated" (152), she considers this refinement as evidence that she must be Angel's preferred lover. Irony aside, the aesthetic energy of the passage derives from the musicality of Hardy's representation of the sigh, and the lingering impression of the scene is that sympathy operates as a transient, collective experience between all four of the dairymaids, not just between Retty and Tess—the noble lineage-bearers brought low—but also with Marian and Izz Huett, who are not sprung from such patrician origins.

3. THE MATTER OF A SIGH

If Hardy's aesthetics gesture toward an ambivalence toward the hierarchical organization of human sympathy that had been narrativized in works such as Spencer's, this correlates with his conviction that authorship bears a degree of moral responsibility to democratize the sympathetic impulse. Spencer's categorization of sympathy, which was based explicitly on racial and class differences, likely jarred with Hardy's commitment to

producing works that, as he wrote in “The Science of Fiction,” demonstrate “a sympathetic appreciativeness of life in *all* its manifestations” (my emphasis).²² Furthermore, as Caroline Sumpter has shown, Hardy shared with his friend and mentor Leslie Stephen a conviction that the moral purpose of the author was to champion ethical growth through aesthetic means.²³ Hardy “said that any community would contain a minority of ‘sensitive souls,’” as Roger Ebbatson has noted.²⁴ And because Hardy does not replicate Spencer’s assumption that emotional sensitivity or sympathy is less acute among the lower classes, in his novels this sensitivity is not predicated on the same powerful conflation of biological inheritance, cultivation, and sympathy that Spencer espoused.

Speaking more broadly, sympathy as an experiential mode that both operates upon and generates an egalitarian standard is in step with how Hardy considered that altruistic behavior might be brought into being. Writing in 1890, he proposed that

Altruism, or The Golden Rule, or whatever “Love your Neighbour as Yourself” may be called, will ultimately be brought about I think by the pain we see in others reacting on ourselves, as if we and they were a part of one body. Mankind, in fact, may be and possibly will be viewed as members of one corporeal frame.²⁵

In this statement, humanity is envisioned as a giant organism of connective tissues. Hardy establishes a sense of leveling sympathy, which might render the whole of humanity equalized upon a shared plane of felt existence. This idealized form of sympathy is predicated on a reflexive, materially derived responsiveness to the suffering of others. Will Abberley notes that “instinctive communication encodes sympathy in [Hardy’s] fiction which conventional language suppresses.”²⁶ This type of “instinctive communication,” and the sympathy that it can produce, is captured by the sigh. In Hardy’s writing, the sigh often emerges when heightened emotion overtakes social convention and is difficult to contain or stifle, partly because it is not always a voluntary or consciously expressed display of emotion, as in *The Woodlanders*, when Grace declares “she did not mind it; but she sighed,” her sigh unintentionally revealing her genuine feelings on the matter.²⁷ Furthermore, on the threshold between breath, sound, and language, the sigh is elusive as an expression; it resists schematization. Hence its aesthetic potential for Hardy, who dramatizes its migratory prowess as a vehicle of emotion. Poyatos acknowledges that classifying the sigh is difficult because of this equivocality, writing that “the stimulus is in many instances much more unidentifiable and

elusive—let alone the many emotional blends that may trigger sighing—and all the possible contextual elements lead often to misinterpretation.”²⁸ Both Hardy and Spencer recognize that paralinguistic sympathy involves a high degree of contingency. Spencer considered that this contingency could be surmounted by a cultivated mode of listening that would recognize and respond sympathetically to the various emotional “blends” that prompt changes in vocal tone, cadence, and pitch. While Hardy’s deep curiosity in the *potential* of the sigh prioritizes its efficacy as means by which to pool affect, his writing also signals an interest in how its elusiveness can result in precisely the kind of misidentification to which Poyatos refers.

Hardy does not shy away from the sigh’s elusive quality but actively experiments with both its possibilities and limits. Early in *The Return of the Native*, he toys with the idea of how such expressiveness might encourage the extension of sympathy between the human and natural realms. Eustacia (as yet unnamed) stands watching a lighted window on the heath below through a telescope after the bonfire on Rainbarrow is abandoned. Hardy writes:

Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally into the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs had broken silence, the bushes had broken silence, the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs. Thrown out on the winds it became twined in with them, and with them it flew away.

What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind which had led to her presence here. There was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound, the woman’s brain had authorized what it could not regulate. (55–56)

This passage focuses on “a sound,” but Hardy does not give the reader a description of what this specific sound is until later in the passage. The disclosure of what the sound that “mingles with the wild rhetoric of night” actually “is” becomes deferred—instead, the description focuses on how this “sound” combines seamlessly with the other sounds: the bluffs, the bushes, and the heather bells. The repetition of “and” throughout the passage induces a sense of individual sounds aggregating into a cohesive harmony. And when Eustacia’s voice finally unites with the chorus of the heath, her expression is not articulated in words but a sounded “sigh.” Following the extended pause of the semicolon, Eustacia’s sigh is the final “and” that completes the compound

soundscape. The heath becomes an almost sensate, breathing organism that apparently impels Eustacia not simply to play witness to its soundscape but to enter into its mood and become part of it; “her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs” (52). The scene invites a reading of a harmonious coextension between human and organic life, a vision of sympathetic reciprocity between nature and humanity where the sighs of the organic and human worlds are “phrase[s] of the same discourse.” The bluff in this scene is Hardy’s leading the reader to assume that Eustacia’s sigh must be the result of “something in her mind” that fortuitously corresponds with the “emotion” of the heath’s soundscape, when, in fact, the sigh is actually prompted by the human activity Eustacia surveys. While Hardy ultimately retreats from fully realizing the tantalizing possibility of human-organic sympathy, the sheer aesthetic work that the passage performs leaves the sense that the mimetic resonance between Eustacia’s sigh and the sounds of the heath has not been fully abandoned, as its vestiges still echo in the reader’s inner ear. There is a pronounced, lingering sense that Eustacia’s sigh could in fact have been produced by any combination—conscious or otherwise—of these emotional triggers.

Both here and elsewhere in the novel, Eustacia’s sighs seem to hold a form of matter—both physical and psychological—that cannot be fully unfolded in words. Hardy’s interest in tracing the particular equivocality of the sigh continues over the course of the novel, where he again considers how the potency of the sigh is diminished when attempts are made to pin down, explain, or ascribe a single source of emotion to its occurrence. Often, these attempts at linguistic decryption strike a false note, resulting in a failure of sympathetic identification. As much as the sigh’s diffusiveness can facilitate moments of associative responsiveness, then, it can also become implicated in interpretative misgivings.

Eustacia’s repressed emotions often escape in paroxysms that shake her whole frame like “a pestilent blast.”²⁹ At times her unregulated, involuntary sighs seem wayward, unfettered from the operations of the voice and not wholly a manifestation of the conscious mind, but impressing upon her body so forcefully as to incite a vibrating tremor that shakes her. As Steven Connor suggests, the distinctness of the sigh is not brought about by being “pressed out into audibility, impressed into audible shapes and postures, but seems rather to be escaping.”³⁰ “That tragic sigh” of Eustacia’s, which is “so much like a shudder,” is typically released in seclusion, when there is no one (except perhaps the heath) to listen or respond (143). Eustacia’s sighs are both a symptom and the result of her

isolated state, the "sudden listenings between her sighs" met by silence. Yet these isolated moments are also when she is most free—free to give breath to dissatisfaction, frustration, despair, longing.

On a rare occasion when someone else is present to hear her, Clym unsuccessfully attempts to decipher the meaning of Eustacia's sigh. For Eustacia, Clym's metropolitanism following five years spent in Paris is deeply attractive: "A young and clever man was coming into that lonely heath from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from heaven" (108). In her abstracted conception of Clym, Eustacia envisions a man who has been imbued with the sophistication of the French capital, "the centre and vortex of the fashionable world" (109), steeped in all the cultural activity Spencer considered important to the refinement of sensibility. Yet as their later exchange demonstrates, this refinement has not resulted in the sympathetic identification that Spencer trusted it would generate. Eustacia emits one of her tragic sighs, and Clym responds: "You sigh, dear, as if you were sorry for it; and that's a hopeful sign." Eustacia responds, "No. I don't sigh for that. There are other things for me to sigh for, or any other woman in my place" (247). The apparently singular meaning of her sigh is subject to Clym's logical mode of decryption, which emphasizes the failure of language to fulfill its communicative function. Clym seeks to pin down a fixed signification to Eustacia's sighs, but his logic-driven interpretation remains an incomplete means for sharing the emotions that prompt them.

Hardy's sighs draw attention toward the inadequacy of language as a way of determining and vicariously experiencing the blends of emotion that trigger such paralinguistic expression. Spencer also recognized that interpretation alone was an incomplete means for producing fellow-feeling, and that the intellect can encroach unhelpfully on sympathetic identification. In "The Purpose of Art," Spencer suggested that sympathy involves a two-stage process. The first stage, "before there can be sympathy," requires a cultivated knowledge of the "natural language of the emotions," which are communicated through vocal alterations and body language: "what tones and changes of voice, what facial expressions, what movements of the body, signify certain states of mind." However, the "knowledge of this natural language does not constitute sympathy," as there may be "clear perception of the meanings of all these traits without any production of fellow feeling."³¹ The production of sympathy requires a secondary stage, which is essential to grasping the essence of these changes and feeling them too, and is infinitely subtler and more

refined than the first. However, Spencer does not articulate what this second stage actually is, or the kind of approach it requires. The quality of sympathy is beyond articulation for him; while stressing the importance of extricating the intellectual from the emotional elements of sympathetic experience, he comes unstuck when it comes to identifying how sympathy actually operates.

Spencer's inability to articulate the experience of sympathy seems inevitable given that he is attempting to describe such experience through "the intellectual element": a logical, scientific type of language, which, as he acknowledges, infringes on the emotional type of language.³² This deductive, reasoning approach is not able to capture the affective quality of sympathy. The difficulty that Spencer runs into goes some way in clarifying why Hardy's writing is able to accomplish what Spencer's cannot. Hardy stresses how paralinguistic expressions such as the sigh do not *mean* in ways that can be reproduced through the linguistic method, but rather embody a multiplicity of emotion that resides outside the strict parameters of language. The sigh rarely expresses a single mood, but mood in its more collective, elusive, and indefinable sense; its immediacy expresses the atmosphere of one's being in a form that exists as a shadow of language. And the sigh, as Hardy shows us in Eustacia and Clym's vexed exchange, does not readily give up its nebulous expressivity to the logical systems of decipherment. Hardy makes this point aesthetically as much as narratively; in attending so carefully to the poetic elements of his prose, at its finest his writing is enveloped in a mantle of rhythmic and phonetic affect that at once heightens and resists its subject matter. Effectively, Hardy's writing mimetically performs a similar kind of work on an aesthetic level that the sigh does on an emotional level. The rhythmic elements so central to Hardy's meditations, particularly in those passages on the sigh I have dwelt on so far, mean that these textual moments rely on their sounding as much as their wording for their affective intensity. And the sigh itself—in all its nebulous elusiveness—provides a vehicle for expressing the more unutterable forms of feeling.

4. REFLECTION, SYMPATHY, AND THE SIGH

Whereas I have so far dwelt on the instinctive, physiologically determined element of paralinguistic expression in both Hardy's and Spencer's writing, to consider nonlexical expression exclusively in this way would be to overlook the reflective aspect often present in Hardy's sighs, as well as the reflective sensibility required for Spencer's higher forms of sympathy.

Certainly, both Spencer and Hardy located the primary mechanisms of emotional expression in the instinctive physiological body. However, it is also possible to detect the influence of the philosophical tradition of sympathy on both writers, wherein reflection was considered a central and defining feature of human sympathy. Eighteenth-century philosophical models of sympathy advanced by David Hume, and adapted by Adam Smith, had stressed the significance of reflection in the process of human sympathy. Discussing such models, Michael L. Frazer explains that in eighteenth-century formulations of fellow-feeling,

The natural language of feeling can communicate emotion from one creature to another on an instinctual level, but the same reflective awareness that gives human beings consciousness of their own emotions also allows them to artificially communicate them to others through the medium of language. This allows for the formation of a uniquely human form of sympathy.³³

The influence of these earlier models seems apparent in both Hardy’s and Spencer’s formulations. As I have already outlined, for Spencer the most elementary form of sympathy was bound to the “natural language of feeling,” but the highest and most developed forms of sympathy required the addition of a refined, reflective aural consciousness. The reflective element of sympathy could thus represent for Spencer a dividing line between the “higher” and “lower” sympathetic development of humans and animals (as well as different races and classes) and was ameliorated through the effects of culture. Aesthetic culture was one means by which sensibility was refined, and so the fundamental link that Spencer perceived between aesthetic sensibility and high forms of sympathy consolidated his conviction that both were indices of advanced human development.

Significantly, Hardy also encodes a reasoning, reflective element in his representations of the sigh, as if to suggest the sigh might sometimes (though not always) convey an outward expression of the reflections of the mind. For instance, whenever “a flash of reason” exposes Wildevé’s inadequacy, Eustacia sighs a “sigh which shook her like a shiver” (65). Elsewhere in his writing, the sigh is similarly dramatized as an expression that can simultaneously embody both instinct and reflection, blending the two together in a single exhalation. In *The Woodlanders*, Grace Melbury’s “sigh of sympathy with Giles” is “complicated by a sense of the intractability of circumstances” (82), indicating how her intuitive affinity with Giles is beset by her reflective understanding that fidelity

to him would result in a betrayal of her father's wishes. In *Tess*, Angel expresses to Tess that he fears he has "been too quick and unreflecting," an admission that takes place directly after he emits a "curious sigh of desperation, signifying unconsciously that his heart had outrun his judgment" (167). As such, Angel's sigh is demonstrative of a belated reflection and precipitates the transitory synchrony between Angel and Tess, narratively described as the "gravitation of the two into one" (167). If, as I have been suggesting, the sigh was part of a cluster of nonlexical communicative forms that Hardy thought might offer more authentic alternatives to language—both for expressing emotion and recognizing complex emotions in others—it seems significant that he repeatedly invokes this sense of instinct *with* reflection.

For Hardy, bestowing a reflective as well as instinctive facility onto the sigh offers a way to avoid language altogether, so that paralinguistic expression might do the communicative work of language and much more besides. As Abberley notes, for Hardy, "the path to a more humane society might lie in rediscovering these bio-semiotics rather than stifling them."³⁴ This nonlexical mode of communication would certainly cohere with his tentatively held vision of an altruistic future where humanity might act like "one corporal frame," an interconnected, symbiotic network of responsiveness comparable to the sympathetic nervous system.

Through the sigh, Hardy gestures toward the possibility of a non-lexically-derived sympathy, but his novels dwell on the chasms that must be bridged before such a future might be realized. As we have seen, Spencer thought that the active cultivation of sensibility might hasten the development of society toward a universal sympathy. In *The Woodlanders*, it seems that, for Hardy, the terms of the debate must be reassessed before any such progress is possible, especially with regard to the idea of cultivation. Megan Ward has argued that Hardy offers "a skeptical view" of cultivation as a form of self-improvement in *The Woodlanders*. The ultimate failure of protagonist Grace Melbury's cultivation, Ward suggests, demonstrates Hardy's demystification of "the naturalizing power of cultivation," as well as his denial of a "nostalgic, unified sense of nature."³⁵ Ward's argument is persuasive, and I think that a similar concern emerges in his characterization of Marty South, who acts as Grace Melbury's narrative foil over the course of the novel. Unlike Grace, who has returned to Little Hintock "mentally trained and tilled into foreignness of view" after an expensive educational program (100), Marty has no formal education and has remained in Little

Hintock to support her ailing father. She is in love with Giles Winterbourne, who has been informally betrothed to Grace since their youth. While Marty and Giles replant trees in a recently cleared coppice, Marty remarks:

“How they sigh directly we put ’em upright, though while they are lying down they don’t sigh at all,” said Marty.

“Do they?” said Giles. “I’ve never noticed it.”

She erected one of the young pines into its hole, and held up her finger; the soft musical breathing instantly set in which was not to cease night or day till the grown tree should be felled—probably long after the two planters had been felled themselves.

“It seems to me,” the girl continued, “as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be.”

“Just as we be?” He looked critically at her. “You ought not to feel like that, Marty.” (59)

Given the depth of Marty’s connection with the local landscape, it is unsurprising that she is receptive to the minutiae of its sounds. What is more surprising, perhaps, is that despite Giles’s and Marty’s shared understanding of the “finer mysteries” of the Hintock woods “as of commonplace knowledge,” Giles has never noticed such a phenomenon (297). The difference in their responsiveness to the sound is explicable in part because of the asymmetry of feeling between the two. That is to say, because Marty is in love with Giles and is aware that her feelings are unreciprocated, she not only *hears* the sound of the murmuring wind through the branches of the young pines but confers an emotional expressivity onto it. This emotion corresponds with her sadness; thus, Marty integrates the “mood” of organic matter with her own.

Marty construes the environmental sound as a mournful “sigh,” before actively reflecting the expressiveness of the sigh back onto the human condition of Giles and herself: “just as we be.” The extension of the em dash relates the life span of the trees to that of the planters. This relation emphasizes the connectedness of the natural and the human world, while at the same time indicating the disparities between the duration of their lives—the newly planted trees will outlast the humans. The next em dash in the passage, which precedes Marty’s “just as we be,” acts as a grammatical, visual, and conceptual echo of the former; Marty recognizes a sympathy between Giles and herself and tries to express it. At the same time, her awareness of the asymmetry in their romantic feelings for each other precludes her expressing this sympathy without recourse to the landscape that binds them together.

There is the sense that Marty is beseeching Giles to hear what she cannot express to him directly, to attend to what is unspoken, and thus to feel the unutterable pain that she feels—she wants Giles to feel with her in the same way that she feels with him.

The impulse behind Marty's candid declaration that "they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be" is twofold. It refers both to the saplings, transplanted into the ground where they will grow up "in earnest," as well as to the maturation of Giles and herself as they enter the strictures of adulthood. However, it also indicates a broader conviction, that "not to have been born is best." Hardy borrowed this philosophically weighty phrase from Sophocles, citing it in an interview with William Archer in 1901.³⁶ Marty's variation, which seems to parallel the Sophoclean principle, holds that to begin life "in earnest" is to live sincerely, and to live sincerely is to suffer, but a life without suffering is not fully lived at all. The "advanced" doctor in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) pushes this outlook further when he pronounces to Jude "the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live."³⁷ Marty's sense that suffering is an intrinsic part of life does not seem borne out of a nihilistic impulse, because she still finds purpose in life. It seems closer, perhaps, to the sentiment George Eliot expresses in *Adam Bede* (1859), that "sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force [. . .] passing from pain into sympathy."³⁸ Either way, the narrative events that follow the scene bear out the veracity of her impression that suffering is an intrinsic aspect of living. Her oblique attempt to express to Giles that a sympathy exists between them is futile. In rejecting her impression of life, "You ought not to feel like that, Marty," Giles all but rejects Marty herself. And after he dies as a result of his steadfast devotion to Grace, it falls to Grace herself to comprehend the synchronicity that had always existed between Marty and Giles. Grace realizes too late that Marty "had formed his true complement in the other sex, had lived as his counterpart, had subjoined her thoughts to his as a corollary" (297).

For Grace, it is "the possibilities of a refined and cultivated inner life, of subtle psychological intercourse" that initially attracts her to Edred Fitzpiers and causes her to reject Giles (148). Yet it is Marty that exemplifies such a sensibility, manifested through her responsiveness to the landscape and close listening to its "sighs," her sympathy toward Giles in sensing that the sadness she interprets in the sound corresponds with them both, and her expansive reflectivity in extending this thought to relate to the vicissitudes of all lives. The potential of the sigh is pushed further, as Hardy demonstrates that as well as *constituting* both reflective

and instinctive activity, the sigh can also *inspire* reflective activity *in the process of cultivation*. Marty’s reflective sympathy is, of course, precipitated by a site of cultivation far removed from those Spencer had referred to in “The Origin”: “the theatre, the concert, the picture gallery” (407). As we have seen, for Spencer, “cultivation” was the refinement of sensibility through aesthetic culture. But here Hardy shows a comparable type of amelioration against the backdrop of a different type of cultivation: the preparation of land for growing trees. Marty’s revelation occurs during a scene of planting, the cultivation of nature. The irony doesn’t seem coincidental, as Hardy plays on the multivalency of “cultivation,” slipping across its primary senses at the same time as he contests the secureness of the gap between these two definitions. In presenting a kind of fellow-feeling that has been prompted by tending to nature, one that is stirred by its “sighs,” Hardy gestures toward an ironic countermodel of sympathy that is generated through cultivation—just not the type of cultivation Spencer had in mind.

The sigh continued to intrigue Hardy long after he abandoned the novel, and he often returned to it in his poetry, perhaps finding the flexibility of the form conducive to a fuller and more concentrated exploration of the nonlexical aspects of language. The sigh appeared most notably in the lyric poem “The Sigh,” in which the speaker expresses a mournful regret for his earlier inattentiveness to his lover’s sighs, expressed when “some sad thought she was concealing” “mingled with her feeling.”³⁹ The speaker is unable to belatedly discern the subtlety of the feeling that prompted these laments, nor the state of mind that they might have reflected. Too late, the speaker comprehends that these quiet, indirect sounds signaled a complexity of emotion that might have been shared if only he had listened more carefully. The speaker is left asking “why she sighed,” an unanswerable question that is called into the void, just as the repetition of “she sighed” at the end of each stanza generates a formal echo across the poem that draws the reader’s aural attention toward the elusive eloquence of this very expression.⁴⁰ Hardy knew the “power of [people] putting themselves in another’s place, and taking a point of view that is not their own.”⁴¹ In the sigh, he found an ideal resource for thinking about the difficulty and contingency of such an act, as well as the importance of nonlexical forms of communication in realizing an embodied form of sympathy. Centralizing poetic effect in his novelistic representations of the sigh and returning to it later in a fully poetic mode, Hardy recognized that engaging with such ideas in an aesthetic register could be as generative as a narrative approach.

But his interest did not extend, as Spencer's did, to mobilizing sympathy as a criterion of difference. Instead, in Hardy's vision, the sigh—a shared expression—might offer a salve of commonality.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Mark Asquith, *Thomas Hardy, Metaphysics and Music*; and John Hughes, *Ecstatic Sound*.
2. Elisha Cohn has considered how Hardy's representation of animals fits into and shapes his ethical paradigm, while Caroline Sumpter has linked Hardy's formulations of sympathy to nineteenth-century scientific debates about the ethical work of sympathy. More specific to my argument here is Will Abberley's reading of Hardy's interest in instinctive signs (such as facial expression, laughter, vocal tone) as foundational to sympathy, though the essay extends this thinking to consider the ideological conceits that shaped nineteenth-century sympathy and Herbert Spencer's participation in this. See Cohn, "No Insignificant Creature," 494–520; Sumpter, "On Suffering and Sympathy," 665–87; Abberley, *English Fiction and the Evolution of Language*, 140–51.
3. Poyatos, *Paralanguage*, 330.
4. Poyatos, *Paralanguage*, 330.
5. Poyatos, *Paralanguage*, 334.
6. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 163.
7. Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 152. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
8. See Hardy, *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy: Notes*, 1:323. Hardy later included Spencer in a list of influential thinkers with whom he acknowledged his "pages" showed "a harmony of view" in a letter to the American literary critic Ernest Brennecke in 1924. See Hardy, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, 259.
9. Spencer, "The Origin and Function of Music," 407. All subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text.
10. Spencer, "The Origin of Music," 468.
11. See Mundy, *Animal Musicalities*, 18. Mundy gives a detailed overview of the differences (and implications) of Darwin's and Spencer's contrasting theories in the first chapter (17–30).
12. "Review: *The Power of Sound*," 209.

13. See Hardy, *Notes*, 274–75; and Hardy, *Text*, 491. For Gurney's full article, see Gurney, "On Some Disputed Points in Music," 106–30.
14. Ebbatson, *The Evolutionary Self*, 44.
15. Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination*, 82–83.
16. Spencer, "Developed Music," in *Facts and Comments*, 55.
17. See, among others, Garson, *Moral Taste*; and Gronow, *The Sociology of Taste*.
18. Mundy, *Animal Musicalities*, 31.
19. Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, 215.
20. See Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, 12.
21. Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society*, 27. On the translation of the Great Chain of Being into a sociological register, see Zon, *Evolution*, 5–6.
22. Hardy, "The Science of Fiction," in *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, 110.
23. Sumpter writes that Hardy was "indebted to Stephen's advocacy of novel writing as an ethical art" and that "tracing the influence of Stephen's evolutionary optimism offers an important corrective to familiar assumptions about Hardy's pessimism." See Sumpter, "Suffering and Sympathy," 666.
24. Ebbatson, *The Evolutionary Self*, 48.
25. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, 235.
26. Abberley, *English Fiction*, 141.
27. Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 276. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
28. Poyatos, *Paralanguage*, 334.
29. Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, 298. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
30. Connor, *Beyond Words*, 34.
31. Spencer, "The Purpose of Art," in *Facts and Comments*, 32–33.
32. Spencer, "The Purpose of Art," 33.
33. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*, 149–150.
34. Abberley, *English Fiction*, 141.
35. Ward, "The Woodlanders and the Cultivation of Realism," 868, 866.
36. Archer, "Real Conversations," 535.
37. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 326.
38. Sumpter argues for the influence of Eliot's expression on Hardy's thinking and identifies that Hardy transcribed this quotation from *Adam Bede* into his notebooks in 1867. See "Suffering and Sympathy," 680.
39. Hardy, "The Sigh," in *The Complete Poetical Works*, 1:278, lines 7–8.
40. Hardy, "The Sigh," 278, lines 18–30.
41. Archer, "Real Conversations," 535.

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