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The Footprint as Object in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) and Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (1895)

*La trace de pas comme objet dans *The Woodlanders* de Thomas Hardy (1887) et *Almayer's Folly* de Joseph Conrad (1895)*

Jane Thomas

- 1 This paper focuses on the motif of the footprint in Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) and Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and seeks to demonstrate the ways in which "objects" become "things" by virtue of their "excess" – and in particular by their enhanced relationship to a subject in this case George Melbury and Kaspar Almayer – the fathers of the individuals who, unconsciously, made the marks. I have no evidence that Conrad read Hardy's twelfth published novel before he published his first, but the plots are remarkably similar in their focus on the attempts by two fathers – the timber merchant George Melbury and the trader Kaspar Almayer – to improve and secure their social status through the education and politic marriages of their daughters Grace and Nina¹. We might speculate on the complementary roles of Marty South and Taminah, the Siamese slave girl owned by the rice farmer Bulangi, who personify the more extreme disempowerment of individual woman by the impersonal forces of class and slavery. We might also explore how both Grace and Nina, the latter more decisively, reject the culture that has been imposed upon them in favour of what they come to regard as their true origins, the frequent use of tribal and racial metaphors to describe the rural inhabitants of Hintock and their comparison to Pacific islanders and note that, having dropped her purse in the woods, Grace comments: "Money is of little more use at Hintock than on Crusoe's island; there's hardly any way of spending it" (Hardy 1981, 135). For the purpose of this paper, however, the footprint as object/thing is my focus.
- 2 In 1978 the earliest fossil *hominin* footprints in the world were unearthed in Laetoli, northern Tanzania, on a cemented ash layer produced by a volcanic eruption. They are

3.66 million years old and were made by two bipedal individuals moving on the same palaeosurface and in the same direction (see Masao *et al.*). From these tracks palaeontologists gleaned information regarding the stature, weight, and gait of these individuals, as well as their sexual dimorphism, behaviour and variability and direction of travel. In 2012 Robert McFarlane described the experience of following a prehistoric footprint trail just north of Liverpool, UK, at Formby Point – one of several thousand footprint trails “laid down in the stacked silt strata like a growing pile of pages” (McFarlane 362-363). There is something deeply moving about these fossil records which have transformed the ethereal, delible and immaterial naked footprint into records of individual journeys made by our remotest ancestors in certain moments in deep time. In the case of the footprints at Formby Point the record, once uncovered, will last only until “the next strong tide or storm, when it in turn is lifted off to uncover the one beneath” (361). Each of these footprints represents a single, unrepeatable and probably unconscious act. For their modern-day human discoverers however, they are ciphers; revealing the text of the life of a human being in a series of codes which form partial narratives which we inform with our own experience. The footprints invite us to inhabit them, to imagine who made them, the circumstances of their journey and the relationships between the individuals: to imagine ourselves walking in the literal footsteps of our ancient ancestors and to decipher their story and its relevance to ourselves.

- 3 The idea of a subjective, if imaginary, encounter with our remote progenitors through the marks they made in the ash of an extinct volcano, or in ancient estuarine mud, accords well with Bill Brown's definition of the “object” and the “thing” in *Critical Enquiry* (2001). Objects, he suggests, disclose information about history, society, nature, culture – about us – but “we only catch a glimpse of things” in our *direct* and subjective encounter with the object.

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 4)

- 4 “Things” suggest “what is excessive in objects”, what exceeds the objects' material or utile properties, when they become “values, fetishes, idols, and totems [...] [T]hingness amounts to latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects) [...]. [A]ll at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else (sic)*” (Brown 5, original italics). Human actors encode things with significance so that the question is not what things are but what work they perform. As Bruno Latour asserts, “things do not exist without being full of people” (Latour qtd in Brown 12), and the footprint is one of the most pregnant examples of this co-dependency.
- 5 For the Norse and Celtic races, the carved image of a shod foot going towards water symbolised the soul, within in its physical body, approaching death and dissolution. The naked footprint is the image of the disembodied soul returning to its spiritual home. It is a sign of purity and vulnerability – baring one's soul – removing the actual and spiritual barrier between oneself and the natural world: for, to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins in “God's Grandeur”, “nor can foot feel being shod”. The Buddha is

supposed to have left an imprint of his foot on a stone near to Kusinara as reminder to his followers of his continuing presence on earth. The footprint also functions as a metaphor for the outline of the space a building takes up on the earth, as well as for the total impact that a thing – a building, a human, a car, a city – has on the earth in terms of its carbon emissions.

- 6 In human terms, the footprint marks the direct point of contact between an individual and the material world. It is also the mark of the material world's contact with the individual her/himself. As such the footprint offers itself as a thing to be filled with significance – to be encountered. Just as an intaglio design carries the ink which will produce the image, the human footprint, Palaeolithic or Anthropocene, carries a signifying power beyond its object-function. Grace Melbury's reference to "Crusoe's island" is relevant here in relation to the effect of the "print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to see in the sand", and which leaves Robinson Crusoe, who has longed for human company, "thunderstruck", "terrified", "like one pursued" (Defoe, chapter 11). Nor is it possible, he tells the reader, "to describe how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me in, how many wild ideas were found every moment in my fancy, and what strange unaccountable whimsies came into my thoughts by the way" (Defoe).
- 7 A curious doubling, or splitting, occurs between Crusoe and the "apparition" he imagines has made the print, which leads him to feel "out of himself". Initially Crusoe is comforted by the thought that the footprint is his own, until discovering that his foot is larger than the naked shape in the sand before him. While his reaction demonstrates what Stephen Curkpatrick describes as "an antipathy to the other" (Curkpatrick 249), it also demonstrates an antipathy to the spectre (or apparition) of his colonial self, as he imagines his island, his kingdom under threat of hostile invasion. This "haunting trace of another" initially provokes a paradoxical desire "to eliminate any discernible trace of his existence on the island for others to find [...], to remove all traces of himself". Crusoe follows this with a frantic attempt to strengthen his fortress against an imagined assault and to curtail all his activities for fear of betraying his existence to a hostile invader. As Curkpatrick suggests, this has the effect of "closing down Crusoe's sense of future" for two years during which "his imagination turns from inventiveness for survival to inventions of violence" and the urge to destroy the other (250).
- 8 Several of Hardy's reviewers and critics have examined thematic and stylistic features common to both Hardy and Conrad, but I'd like to pick up on J. Hillis Miller's discussion of Hardy's modernism in the *Blackwell Companion to Hardy* edited by Keith Wilson, in which Miller discerns in Hardy and Conrad, among other indicators of modernism, "an increased attention to the registering of 'irrelevant details'" which goes beyond their quotidian or historical function. The modernist text, Miller suggests, "often involves the careful and deliberate synthesizing of a whole text around a complex system of recurrent metaphors and symbols, so that every detail counts" (Miller 434). I argue here that the footprint provides just such an "irrelevant detail" in both *The Woodlanders* and *Almayer's Folly* and, in the former particularly, performs the synthesizing function that Miller regards as symptomatic of the modernist text. In addition, the footprint illustrates the transition from object to thing in its representation of the objectification of, and subjective investment in, Grace Melbury and Nina Almayer by their respective fathers, which, as in Defoe's novel, assumes an enhanced significance for the future of George Melbury and contributes to the stultification and paralysis of Kaspar Almayer.

- 9 The footprint functions as a leitmotif in *The Woodlanders* from the reader's introduction to Little Hintock on the opening page of the novel – where the narrator invites us to imagine “the blistered soles” that have trodden and formed the “forsaken coach-road” from Bristol to the south shore of England which both passes and leads out from it – to Grace's encounter with Tim Tang's man trap, from which she is saved by her fleetness of foot, but which effects her reconciliation with the errant Fitzpiers. It features less so in *Almayer's Folly*, but is of equal significance, not least in the poignant scene of Nina's final confrontation with her father before she abandons him for the Balinese prince, Dain Maroola.
- 10 Shortly before Grace Melbury's return to Hintock from boarding school, the insomniac Melbury is discovered by his wife inspecting the path leading from his cottage. Tormented by the “wrong” he did to Giles Winterbourne's father, by luring his fiancée away to become his own first wife and Grace's mother, Melbury's guilt is exacerbated by his lack of provision for Grace's future and his vow to give her as a gift to Giles by way of amends. He has spared no expense in educating Grace “so as to make the gift as valuable a one as it lay in his power to bestow” but in consequence fears he is “wasting her (sic) to give her to a man of no higher standing than he” (Hardy 1981, 20):
- He took the candle from her hand, held it to the ground, and removed a tile which lay in the garden path.
 “Tis the track of her shoe that she made when she ran down here, the day before she went away all those months ago. I covered it up when she was gone; and when I come here to look at it I ask myself again, why should she be sacrificed to a poor man?” (Hardy 1981, 21).
- 11 For Melbury, Grace's footprint is a synecdochic representation of Grace herself, not as she is but as he projects her, not as she was then but what she will become in her journey away from her home and her father. It is also therefore the spectre or apparition of Melbury's self-projection through his daughter. It embodies his subjective investment of his capital in her, and her subsequent commodification as capital with the potential for his own social advancement. Though claiming to be adding value to his gift, Melbury also confesses that his determination to educate Grace is the result of his own humiliation as a boy by the Parson's son when questioned about the *Iliad*: “They may laugh at me for my ignorance; [...] [b]ut they shall never laugh at my children, if I have any: I'll starve first!” (Hardy 1981, 32).
- 12 Kaspar Almayer's hopes are likewise pinned on his beautiful daughter, Nina, whom he has sent away for ten years at the age of six to be educated by nuns in Singapore. Awaiting the return of Dain, who has agreed to search for the river and fabled treasure promised to him by Almayer's father-in-law (the English adventurer and trader Tom Lingard, who adopted and educated Nina's Malayan mother), Almayer dreams of a life in Europe with his daughter: “They would be rich and respected. Nobody would think of her mixed blood in the presence of her great beauty and of his immense wealth. Witnessing her triumphs he would grow young again, he would forget the twenty-five years of heart-breaking struggle on this coast where he felt like a prisoner” (Conrad 5). In rebellion against her convent life where, like Grace Melbury, she has been subjected to disdain because of her origins (though in Nina's case it is because of her mixed blood rather than her social class), Nina rejects “the white side of her descent represented by a feeble and traditionless father” and embraces her Malayan heritage: “After all it was her life; it was going to be her life, and so thinking she fell more and more under the influence of her mother' and her tales of the vanished glories of the Rajahs 'from whose

race she had sprung” (43). Finally, Nina deserts Almayer to accompany her lover Dain, who is in flight from the Dutch authorities. The final meeting between father and daughter takes place on a small islet in the mouth of the river from where she and Dain plan to escape to Bali by boat. A stunned Almayer regards the footprints made in the sand by his departing daughter, whom he will never see again:

Now she was gone his business was to forget, and he had a strange notion that it should be done systematically and in order [...]. [H]e fell on his hands and knees, and creeping along the sand, erased carefully with his hand all traces of Nina's footsteps. He piled up small heaps of sand, leaving behind him a line of miniature graves right down to the water. After burying the last slight imprint of Nina's slipper he stood up, and, turning his face towards the headland where he had last seen the prau, he made an effort to shout out loud again his firm resolve to never forgive. [...] He brought his foot down with a stamp. He was a firm man – firm as a rock. Let her go. He never had a daughter. He would forget. He was forgetting already. (Conrad 196)

- 13 The fathers' fetishization of the daughters' footprints reveals both the latency and excess of the object-as-thing. In each case the footprint represents not only the idealised, triumphant future figure of the daughter as lady, but also the father as sole proprietor, and beneficiary, of that triumph. As in *Robinson Crusoe* the footprint represents a spectral other manifested in and by the social ambitions of the man who seeks to profit from patriarchal and colonial systems of exchange, but which threatens to close down the futures of both father and daughter as self-determining human beings. Almayer's defiant attempt to replace Nina's departing footprints with his own ("He brought his foot down with a stamp") emphasises his futile attempt to obliterate her subjectivity with his own while drawing attention to the pathos of his folly.
- 14 In contrast to Nina, Grace capitulates to the pull of wealth and position instilled in her by her father and is eventually reconciled with her philandering husband. Though she is saved from serious injury and possible death by her light step on the mantrap set for Fitzpiers by the cuckolded Tim Tangs, the symbolism is inescapable. Evading the jaws of the trap, which has sunk its teeth into the silk of her discarded gown, Grace enters the circumscribing arms of her husband who removes her from her father's sight to a Midland town two hundred miles away.
- 15 Almayer's systematic burial of Nina's footprints symbolises not only the death of his ambitions but also the death of the spectral self through which he has lived since his forced marriage to her mother. Nina is more than dead to him, he seeks to erase all trace of her existence from his own: "Certain things had to be taken out of his life, stamped out of sight, destroyed forgotten" (Conrad 199). Almayer's attempt to stamp Nina out of his memory by obliterating her footstep with his own is futile as he has no existence outside of his existence in and through her. As with *Crusoe*, the "haunting trace" of the other obliterates all traces of himself and, in a shocking act of symbolic filicide (or naticide), Almayer's burial of Nina's footprints foreshadows his own near entombment in his unfinished and rotting house. Ironically, and fittingly perhaps, each "miniature grave" lends the delible footprints an enhanced symbolic significance, serving less to obliterate than to emphasise by bringing them into stark relief. The artificial preservation of Grace's print (and Melbury's ambitions) is achieved through a similar act of entombment beneath a tile. Both fathers fetishize the footprints left by their daughters in the act of leaving them for journeys that will separate them irrevocably in terms of sympathies as well as miles.

- 16 Bill Brown reminds us of W.J.T. Mitchell's recognition of how the discovery of "a new kind of object", the fossil, "enabled romanticism to recognize and to refigure its relation to the mortal limits of the natural world" (Brown 5). Pat Shipman broadly defines a fossil as "any trace, impression, or remains of a once-living organism" (Shipman 1). Like those of Grace and Nina, the fossilised footprints of the Laetoli hominins made 3.66 million years ago are daily subjected to the depredations of time and tides, though the process is many times more protracted. Nevertheless, in each case the traces left by the departing daughters force their fathers to reconsider their relationships to their romanticized conceptions of their daughters and to their own mortality. If a footprint measures the impact of a thing, those of Grace and Nina measure their impact upon the men who seek to live vicariously through them. They represent the future selves each man has projected onto the young women, and their own metaphoric deaths: in *Almayer's Folly* his actual death. At the same time, the footprint as "object-thing" serves as an emblem of patriarchal control and exchange and, in their clear direction of travel away from the father and towards the husband, those of Grace and Nina function as a poignant reminder of the limited journeys available to women in the late nineteenth-century colonial world.
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NOTES

1. In *Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist* (1921), presented to Hardy by the author, Samuel Chew notes a similarity between the opening of Conrad's and Ford Maddox Ford's *Romance: A Novel* (1903) and the setting of Hardy's "A Distracted Preacher". In Florence Hardy's notes on Chew's book, Hardy adds "It should be *vice versa*, 'The Distracted Preacher' having been written thirty years before the other" (Purdy & Millgate, vol. 6, 155-157).

ABSTRACTS

The paper looks at the significance of the footprint in Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*. Both texts feature a footprint (or set of footprints) made by a daughter who is forced to carry the hopes and social/imperial ambitions of her father. In both cases the empty footprint is a signifier of the presence and absence of the person who made it. Where Melbury seeks to preserve Grace's footprint by placing a slate or flat stone over it, Almayer carefully and methodically seeks to erase the prints left by the departing Nina, not by brushing them but by burying each of them in its own small tomb of sand. We could also read Melbury's attempts to preserve Grace's footprint as a form of entombment, in which case the footprint can be read as signifying the death of the daughter as autonomous subject and her preservation as signifier and carrier of fatherly ambition. Linking these texts to the most famous footprint of all, that left by Man Friday on Robinson Crusoe's "desert" island, the paper reads both texts in the light of theories of Empire and Imperialism. Both Melbury and Almayer seek to cultivate, and trade their daughters on the marriage market, in order to secure social (and trade) advantages for themselves. In *The Woodlanders* this may be set against the colonisation and cultivation of Hintock Wood and the labour of the woodlanders themselves. In *Almayer's Folly*, the attempted trading of the mixed-race Nina takes place against the background of her father's failed trading enterprises in the Borneo Jungle.

L'article se penche sur la signification donnée à une trace de pas dans le roman de Hardy *The Woodlanders*, et celui de Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*. Ces deux textes montrent un père cherchant à imposer ses ambitions sociales/coloniales à sa fille ; et dans les deux cas, une trace de pas laissée par la jeune-fille fonctionne comme le signifiant de sa présence-absence. Mais alors que Melbury cherche à préserver la trace de pas de sa fille Grace en la recouvrant d'une pierre plate, Almayer s'emploie avec méthode et acharnement à effacer les traces de sa fille Nina, non pas en les balayant mais en enterrant chacune d'elles sous un petit monticule de sable. Il est possible de lire le geste de Melbury comme un enterrement lui aussi, ce qui ferait de la trace ensevelie le signifiant de la mort de sa fille comme sujet autonome, alors que sa préservation impliquerait que la fille endosse l'ambition de son père. Un lien possible entre ces textes est la trace de pas la plus célèbre de toutes, celle de Vendredi dans Robinson Crusoé, qui permet de relire les épisodes à la lueur des théories sur l'Empire et l'impérialisme. Melbury tout comme Almayer cherche à cultiver et à « vendre » sa fille en mariage, de manière à s'assurer un avantage social ou commercial. Cela se fait dans *The Woodlanders* sur fond de colonisation et de culture des bois de

Hintock, par le travail des forestiers eux-mêmes. Dans *Almayer's Folly*, la tentative de vendre Nina s'inscrit dans le contexte des entreprises commerciales ratées de son père sans la jungle de Bornéo.

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oeuvre citée *Woodlanders* (The), *Almayer's Folly*

Mots-clés: objet, marchandise, objectivation, colonisation, inhumation, fétichisme, trace de pas, paléontologie, sujet, femme, sujétion

Keywords: object, commodification, colonisation, entombment, fetishism, footprint, palaeontology, subject, women, disempowerment

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Professor Thomas is an internationally-recognised expert and author of several book and articles on the life and work of Thomas Hardy. Her media appearances include Radio 4's *In Our Time* and *Woman's Hour*, BBC 2's *Great British Railway Journeys* and BBC 4's *Books that Made Britain*.

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