

On the Tragic World of W. H. Hudson's
Romances and His View of Nature
— With Priority Given to *El Ombú*
and *An Old Thorn* —

by

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El Ombú and *An Old Thorn* are, in my opinion, the most important short stories of W. H. Hudson (1841–1922) and there is something in common between the two. It is the purpose of this thesis to compare their similarity in relation to his view of nature and value.

(1)

Hudson was a singular natural essayist who depicted nature with emotion as well as with an observant eye, but not only nature but also men, a part of nature, are depicted in *El Ombú* and *An Old Thorn*. Johnnie and Marty (his wife) appear in the latter as main characters, and Santos, Dona Mericie (his wife), Melinton (his slave), Valerio, Donata (his wife), Bruno (their child), and Monica (his wife) in the former first. These characters to the end are carried to horrible tragedies without being relieved.

Firstly let me refer to *El Ombú*. Santos died with a "face terrible to look at" and "of a dead man who had died with wide-open eyes" in a strange country; Dona Mericie died because of Santos' bitterness against her; Melinton was killed by Santos; Valerio was given two hundred lashes to death in the army; Bruno was also killed by the murderer of his father; Monica lost her reason after her husband's death.

Secondly let me refer to *An Old Thorn*. Johnnie was carried to a place of execution and killed on account of stealing a sheep for a sick wife and his three small hungry children.

It is the above-mentioned inexorable tragedies that run through out these two short stories whose scenes are laid in South America and England. What interpretation may be put on these inexorable tragedies which *El Ombú* and *An Old Thorn* have in common?

(2)

My interpretation is that the tragedies of these two books may be traced to the uncrossed dualistic opposition between nature and civilization, or country and city. If we compare nature and civilization to two circles on a fixed area, Hudson was living in an age where the circle of the latter was growing larger and larger, and attacking the other smaller one, though slowly in the pampas, from which his works could not but have tragical aspects when he wrote about nature and men. When he perceived the civilization circle expanding with the support of science, his attitude was one of *bitter irony against civilization and compassion for nature*, because he was born and bred in the nature circle and was in pursuit of the value in it.

“Come, friend Nicandro,” he would say, “let us sit down in the shade and smoke our cigarettes, and talk of our animals. Here are no politics, under this old ombú, no ambitions and intrigues and animosities...no bitterness except in these green leaves. They are our laurels...the leaves of the ombú. Happy Nicandro, who never knew the life of cities! I wish that I, too, had seen the light on these quiet plains, under a thatched roof. Once I wore fine clothes and gold ornaments and lived in a great house where there were many servants to wait on me. But happy I have never been. Every flower I plucked changed into a nettle to sting my hand. Perhaps that maleficent one, who has pursued me all my days, seeing me now so humbled and one with the poor, has left me and gone away. Yes, I am poor, and this frayed garment that covers me will I press to my lips because it does not shine with silk and gold embroidery. And this poverty which I have found will I cherish, and bequeath it as a precious thing to my child when I die. For with it is peace.”⁽¹⁾

As shown in the above-quoted sentences, he thought that nature was his utopia, but the more highly he valued nature, the more he could not but detest and hate cities and city people (civilization circle) symbolizing “politics”, “ambitions”, “intrigue”, and “animosities”, and feel a heart-felt compassion for “quiet plains” and all living things in them (nature circle) distorted by a machine civilization. It is natural that his world should be “inexorable tragedy tinged with irony”⁽²⁾ all the more because his view of nature was primitive animism and civilization was magnifying beyond the power of men and along the current of the times.

But let us return to concrete examples in the two books. Johnnie was poor but “happy beyond his wildest dreams”. Nevertheless, when he was carried to the large civilization circle of a town out of the small nature circle of a village, he was executed by the below-quoted judge (civilization circle): “By an unhappy chance the judge was in one of his occasional bad moods; he had been entertained too well by one of the local magnates on the previous evening and had sat late, drinking too much wine, with the result that he had a bad liver, with a mind to match it. He was only too ready to seize the first that morning... of exercising the awful power a barbarous law had put into his hands.”⁽³⁾ We can read compassion for Johnnie and irony against the judge in this paragraph!

In *El Ombú* we can also read irony against the lawyers and law of and by men (civilization circle) as well as compassion for an old man in a village (nature circle).

The law is no respecter of persons, and when he, who commits such a deed, is a man of substance, he must expect that Advocates and Judges, with all those who take up his cause, will bleed him well before they procure him a pardon... the judge of First Instance, who had the case before him, had quarrelled about the division of the reward, and both being rich, proud persons, they had allowed themselves to forget the old man waiting there month after month for his pardon, which never came to him.⁽⁴⁾

(3)

Next, let us think of *El Ombú* and *An Old Thorn* in relation to Hudson's view of nature and his value. We should keep in mind that the people living in the small nature circle where Hudson lived thought these tragedies were not derived from human character or the sad destiny of man born with original sin: an ombú tree caused a series of misfortunes for the people who lived at the ombú house, and an old thorn caused the misfortune of Jonnie and Marty. Santos, Donna Mericie, Melinton, Valerio, Donata, Bruno and Monica, in fact, lived in the very ombú house of which it was said that "sorrow and at last ruin comes upon the house on whose roof the shadow of the ombú tree falls;..."⁽⁵⁾ and therefore, their destiny to the last was carried to a horrible tragedy. Johnnie and Marty's tragedy was derived from an old thorn which he and his wife had hurt in their childhood; they had that faith: "in many persons the sense of a strange intelligence and possibility of power in such trees is not a mere transitory state but an enduring influence which profoundly affects their whole lives."⁽⁶⁾

We can understand such a view of nature through his words: "the sense and apprehension of an intelligence like our own but more powerful, in all visible things"⁽⁷⁾, or "trees and all living and growing things have souls"⁽⁸⁾. Both el ombú and an old thorn are not depicted as mere huge trees, but as something so spiritual as to be beyond man's power, and therefore, master of his destiny. As expressed in his words, this view of nature is the "sense of the supernatural in nature"⁽⁹⁾ and the "root of all nature-worship, from fetishism to the highest pantheistic development"⁽¹⁰⁾.

(4)

Now, what value can we think is given to such a primitive and magical view of nature today in the eruption of a technological civilization? First of all, let me refer to man's historical view of nature and world. It is needless to say that Hudson's view of nature is opposed to a modern scientific view of nature symbolized by cities, or artificiality. Before the rise of modern science, we had had an emotional and magical view of nature and world. History tells us that with the development of modern science, the emotional and magical view of nature, in which we revered el ombú or an old thorn as a "mysterious being", collapsed and has changed into the modern scientific view of nature and world, in which nature is only thought to be mere matter to supply production materials. Have we moderns, in the last analysis, been happier since we made nature an object to conquer?

Ah yes, we are all vainly seeking after happiness in the wrong way. It was with us once and ours, but we despised it, for it was only the old common happiness which Nature gives to all her children, and we went away from it in search of another grander kind of happiness which some dreamer—Bacon or another—assured us we should find. We had only to conquer Nature, find out her secrets, make her our obedient

slave, then the earth would be Eden, and every man Adam and every woman Eve. We are still marching bravely on, conquering Nature, but how weary and sad we are getting! The old joy in life, and gaiety of heart have vanished, though we do sometimes pause for a few moments in our long forced march to watch the labours of some pale mechanic seeking after perpetual motion, and indulge in a little, dry, cackling laugh at his expense⁽¹¹⁾.

Man is rooted in earth and draws his breath from heaven; but today his roots are cut and his breath is stifled, and for the first time in the history of the world men have lost touch with nature. We are cut off from nature and we are bleeding at the roots. It is, now, a matter of common knowledge that the modern age, in which most of us live only in a social condition, not a natural one, has given birth to various difficult problems and made the twentieth century an "age of anxiety". When we think that modern anxiety is derived from the fact that we have given too much importance to knowledge, we should recognize again the emotion and value that were under the magical and emotional view of nature and world, because the imbalance between knowledge and emotion causes the contradiction of the twentieth century in which the world has changed more than in the previous three or four centuries, and of moderns living in it. Ikutaro Nishida says in his *Research on the Good*: "A high-thinking man, a sincere man, comes to want agreement between knowledge and emotion . . . These facts show us that there is a strong demand to want agreement between knowledge and emotion . . . As knowledge has made much more rapid progress in modern times, we lack the unity between knowledge and emotion and, to make the matter worse, they have a tendency to eliminate each other"⁽¹²⁾.

Here Hudson's works, *El Ombú* and *An Old Thorn*, can be given an important value without reserve, because the lost importance of emotion and of nature run through his works, and emotion and knowledge are excellently balanced. Hudson was a naturalist and man of letters, a "sort of naturalist". Paradoxically speaking, the world of *El Ombú* or *An Old Thorn*, an inexorable tragedy, can be thought to be a utopia with the emotion which moderns have lost, *because man could be in and with nature and live in the past age where Johnnie and Marty were able to think their unhappiness was due to an old thorn.*

I want to emphasize that the tragedies of these stories were not those of men killed by the trees (nature circle), but of nature which was destroyed by cities and civilized people (civilization circle). Johnnie's death only shows us that a part of the nature circle was also destroyed by the civilization circle and lost *one comrade, a part of organic nature.*

Even if Hudson was criticized "To be alone with nature was his escape, his anodyne, the secret citadel of his heart, . . ."⁽¹³⁾ there are the vast pampas and "love of life and liberty and of green mother earth"⁽¹⁴⁾ in his world.

Without apparent effort he takes you with him into a rare, free, natural world, and always you are refreshed, stimulated, enlarged by going there⁽¹⁵⁾.

NOTES

- (1) W. H. Hudson, *South American Romances*, Duckworth, 1966, p. 611.
- (2) R. E. Haymaker, *From Pampas to Hedgerows and Down: A Study of W. H. Hudson*, Bookman, 1954, p. 341.
- (3) W. H. Hudson, *Nature in Downland & An Old Thorn*, Dent & Sons, 1944, p. 277.
- (4) W. H. Hudson, *South American Romances*, pp. 609-610.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 595.
- (6) W. H. Hudson, *Nature in Downland & An Old Thorn*, p. 226.
- (7) W. H. Hudson, *Far Away and Long Ago*, Dent & Sons, 1951, p. 225.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- (11) W. H. Hudson, *The Purple Land*, Dent & Sons, 1951, pp. 261-262.
- (12) Ikutarō Nishida, *Research on the Good*, Iwanami, 1959, p. 87.
- (13) "Introduction" by R. Curle to *Adventures among Birds*, Dent & Sons, 1951, p. 5.
- (14) W. H. Hudson, *Nature in Downland*, p. 163.
- (15) "Forword," by J. Galsworthy to *The Green Mansions*, Modern Library, 1915, p. 7.

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