

At Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow, silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half-asleep as they stalk.

Only thins smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties die.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by;
War's annals will fade into night
Ere their story die.

Thomas Hardy

At Time of 'Breaking of Nations'

"Thou art my battle-axe and weapons of war: for with thee I will break in pieces the nations, and with thee I will destroy kingdoms." *Jeremiah 51; 20*

That the title refers to this quotation from the Old Testament and that although Hardy wrote the poem at the time of The First World War (in 1915), his first idea for it was in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War, both suggest that he is looking beyond the particular to the universal, to the inevitable persistence beyond any war of working the ground to grow food and young couples falling in love. The thin smoke of the grass is an image for persistent life and the shared whispered secret of the lovers echoes it: as so often in Hardy, the small and particular is given universal significance. The man and the horse harrowing clods follow a line "half asleep", a line that is echoed in the thin line of smoke from the bonfire of couch grass: both are images of persistent forward and upward movement.

"Dynasties" (a word historians use about families of kings over many years) fade into insignificance in the face of this very ordinary Dorset scene and the contrasting simple vocabulary describing the stumbling, nodding horse. There is a similar contrast of vocabulary between the formal "War's annals" and the dialect word "wight" and intimate word "whispering" to which it is connected through rhythm and alliteration.

Rhythm enacts this deceptively simple poem, the dactylic rhythm of the first and third lines gaining regular forward movement like that of the man and his horse in two anapaests in the second and fourth lines: "In a slow silent walk" and "Half asleep as they walk". The end-stopped line about the couch grass in verse two creates an emphasis on the strong first word of the third line "Yet", restoring an seemingly unstoppable dactylic rhythm in the appropriately worded "Yet this will go forward the same".

Hardy deliberately uses archaic words to suggest the timelessness of the cycles of nature: "Yonder", "wight" and "ere". The man's relationship with the earth is echoed in the relationship of the lovers.