

# The Origin of Thomas Hardy's Pessimistic Vision

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## Abstract:

It is always interesting and challenging to examine the shaping influences of an artist's mind and writings. Sometimes, we understand their goal and sometime we don't. Thomas Hardy is no exception. He offers an exceptionally intriguing case where his major novels call 'Novels of characters end environment' have what can be called a significant element of thought. Today, without any apparent sense of incongruity, critics and readers frequently accuses Hardy to be a pessimist novelist but without examining the real causes and impact of such a vision. He is used to thrusting abstraction and theories on his artistic creation. Hardy explore in his Wessex novels major issue which is either his pessimism or realism. An in-depth study of his novels will obviously persuade us that his attitude towards life is pessimistic. In discussing the causes of his pessimism, let's focus on his living environment and how he was influenced by his own Victorian society. This paper is an attempt to discuss Hardy's pessimistic vision with the ultimate goal of finding a better understanding of that issue.

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## Introduction

We are in 15th century Victorian England with the industrial revolution challenging all religious thinking. Ignoring religion and its prowess, the scientific world will conquer the hearts of the English and the whole world with inventions and scientific prowess in all social fields. From there will arise a doubt on the question of God with the writings of certain writers, the most prolix of whom is Charles Darwin. Indeed, this author with his work "The Origin of Species" will upset the order of religious beliefs. The writers of this era will jeopardize the question of the existence of God, because science gives concrete results to their problems. Among these writers, Thomas Hardy will be the most controversial thanks to his writings which severely criticize religion. Indeed, in the works of Thomas Hardy, the human being is first of all condemned to strangeness in his environment. On the one hand, it is the victim of exclusions resulting from social and economic developments and conservatism.

Author of some of the most famous novels of English literature of the Victorian Period, *Tess of the d'Urberville*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure*, among others, Hardy (1840-1928) undertook studies in London. Architecture, which he studied there, did not prevent him from eyeing a literary career. Very early influenced by Spencer and Schopenhauer, he naturally nourished his innate pessimism. Haunted by the theme of love, marriage and death, Thomas Hardy's novels do not leave readers and critics indifferent: if they do not move them to the point of sometimes oppressing them with their dark and tragic tone, they awaken in them a feeling of rejection due to the grotesqueness of certain situations and the excess of suffering endured by the characters.

My pessimism – if pessimism it be – does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs... On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but one plea against « man's inhumanity to man », woman, and to lower animals?... Whatever may be the inherent good or evil in life, it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be... (William Archer, 46)

Hardy is accused of being a pessimist because he is the painter of the darker side of life that those in power hide from society. The opinion is both right and wrong in this context. In fact, there are factors that force us to believe him to be pessimistic. Hardy is hypersensitive because his own life was tragic and dark. For a speculative soul, this world in which we live is a thorny field.

The reasons for his pessimism are linked to the publication of Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* (1859), which opened a vast debate in Victorian England. The discovery of a common origin of species and the laws of evolution calls into question the existence of God, but also an entire conception of nature and the singular place of man in the creation of the world. Darwin waited until 1871 to devote a specific work to human evolution: *The Descent of Man* and Selection in Relation to Sex to add to his thinking. The debate centers lastingly on this question and its moral and political implications. The works of T.H. Huxley (The work Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature, published in 1863, is already devoted to human evolution, well before the publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871), Herbert Spencer, and Leslie Stephen mark important stages in this reflection which places at the heart of the debate the possibility of strictly applying the laws of evolution to man, but also of founding human society on the model of the laws of nature. Many poets of the Victorian era addressed the question of the place of God in the industrial age, including Matthew Arnold and Lord Alfred Tennyson. In *In Memoriam*, an elegiac masterpiece written over seventeen years, the latter shares with us his reflections on man's relationship, on the one hand, with God and, on the other hand, with nature. Arnold's poem entitled *To Marguerite* focuses on the theme of the isolation of man in the so-called modern era because man, once abandoned by God, finds himself prey to solitude. This quote from Hardy tells us a lot: "Well: what we gain by science is, after all, sadness, as the Preacher said. The more we know of the laws and nature of the Universe the more ghastly a business we perceive it all to be." (Hardy, 30)

From a metaphysical and teleological point of view, man has never ceased through religion, philosophy, even political ideology, to

construct an imaginary legitimacy, ensuring and reassuring himself that he found himself at the center of a benevolent world. If the latter was not, man remained the toy of destiny. If the Newtonian revolution still allows Jane Austen to conceive of the world as a machine where a favorable Providence is exercised, the Darwinian revolution leads Hardy to conceive of a mechanical and cold world.

The scientific discoveries of the 19th Century undermine man's certainties: they make him aware of his finitude, of his spatio-temporal insignificance in an indifferent universe. (...) In addition to Darwin's texts, his interpretations and extensions, such as the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer who is the inventor of the concept of "survival of the fittest", will have a major influence on the thought of the time (The expression "survival of the fittest" is Spencer's interpretation of natural selection in the work *Principles of Biology*, 1864. Spencer strives to apply Darwin's biological discoveries to life in society).

In this context, Victorian literature appears as a place of passage for evolutionary theory, but also and above all for its questioning and testing. Thus, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are among the novelists most influenced by Darwin and evolutionism, and numerous studies have been devoted to the influence of this theory on the Victorian novel. The romantic work of Thomas Hardy is particularly interesting in this respect; if he presents it neither as an application, nor as an illustration of the theory of evolution, far from the Zolian "experimental novel", it is nevertheless a sounding board for the scientific discoveries of the time and the place of a true poetic theorization.

Indeed, Hardy enters the debate opened by Darwin and offers, through fiction, an original conception of nature and the place of man within it. Hardian characters are often unsuitable in situations of struggle facing a hostile "environment". From this point of view, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Return of the Native* are particularly dark, and the tragic fate of the eponymous characters seems to indicate all the cruelty of the struggle for existence. Thus, the 'environment' in which they fail to find their place is that of the industrial society of Victorian England. But in their natural environment, Hardian characters can, on the contrary, evolve happily.

Hardy's pessimism is also the result of the impressions he receives from the villager's life. These are many tragedies in the life of increasingly poor Wessex. Hardy's philosophy of the human condition is determined by his natural character and personas. This is why he says in this regard that a man's philosophy of life is an instinctive and captivating subject: « A man's philosophy of life is an instinctive, temperamental matter » (Gibson, 1996). Hardy, practically, completely excludes from his writings the sense of splendor and beauty of human life.

Tess's life is completely devoid of a single moment of happiness. For Hardy, happiness is only an occasional episode in a general drama of pain: "Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain". Hardy's view of life is essentially tragic. He is one of those who believe that life is a boom. His novels focus on human suffering and show that there is no escape for human beings. Hardy's attitude towards life is very melancholy and depressive. He loves people but he hates life intensely. He perceives it in the cruel, blind and oppressive hands of an unknown will "Unknown Will".

## 1- Theoretical Approach

Naturalism is a literary movement which, in the last decades of the 19th century, sought to introduce the method of the human and social sciences into novels. The movement was partly created by Émile Zola. A logical continuation of Realism, the latter intended to describe reality in the most precise way possible, understanding all its immoral or vulgar aspects. Naturalism pursues and persists this idea, but by adding a physiological context and pointing out the fact that the environment where the protagonist lives is one of the reasons for his behavior. In this project, Darwinian theory could be considered as being based on a mechanistic representation of nature. Thus, Philippe Solal evokes the "Darwinian mechanism" and explains that Darwin eliminates any idea of finality from his representation of nature, natural selection being conceived as a pure mechanism, without finality, without intention and without planning (Philippe Solal, N°1, 2010). This is what Thomas Hardy wanted to highlight in his novels, he created characters who want a better life but who, due to their environment, cannot and will never be able to achieve their goals.

## 2- Methodological Approach

Thomas Hardy's pessimism, as depicted in his works, can be analyzed through a methodological frame that considers both his personal experiences and his philosophical outlook. This frame incorporates his observations of life's harsh realities, particularly in the Victorian era, his deterministic worldview, and his focus on human suffering. Hardy was influenced by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who posited that life is inherently driven by an insatiable will, leading to constant striving and suffering. Then, Hardy's understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution likely reinforced his deterministic worldview, suggesting that human beings are subject to forces beyond their control and that life is a struggle for survival. His interest in Greek tragedy, with its focus on fate, suffering, and the tragic downfall of characters, further shaped his pessimistic outlook.

### 1- Causes of Thomas Hardy's Pessimistic Vision

#### a- The Darwinian Bomb

In the conflict that concerns us, the Oxford debate and the two central figures of Wilberforce and Huxley truly take on the value of symbols – a symbol of a sometimes-merciless war, a symbol of the two parties waging it. But we must not believe that this is only a fight between two camps where all the scholars were on one side and all the Christians on the other side, because in many cases –

and this is where things take on a tragic aspect – it also takes place first and foremost within consciousness.

Indeed, scientists are often also believers and they feel internally torn. The following quote illustrates their drama and will allow us to measure the terrible intellectual turmoil caused by Darwinism. It is taken from the memories of the critic and poet Edmund Gosse about his father Philip Gosse who, on the one hand, in the mid-Victorian era, was renowned as a biologist, but on the other hand, he was a member of a non-conformist sect with very strict views: the Plymouth Brethren. This scholar who, like every Christian, accepts the biblical story literally, is a perfect example of the situation we are talking about. And it too takes on the value of a symbol but, this time, of an entirely internal struggle. His son describes here the crisis provoked in Philip Gosse's consciousness by the Darwinian theory of natural selection and evolution:

Ainsi, en cette année 1857, année de crise scientifique, faisaient irruption dans la tête de mon père deux types de pensée, aussi absorbants, aussi convaincants l'un que l'autre, mais totalement inconciliables. On était arrivé à ce grand moment de l'histoire des idées où la nouvelle théorie de la mutabilité des espèces s'appropriait à inonder de lumière tous les domaines de la réflexion et de l'action humaine (...). En bref, d'après cette théorie, il n'y avait eu aucune modification de la surface de la terre, aucune évolution de formes organiques, mais, quand l'acte de la création avait eu lieu, le monde avait instantanément présenté l'aspect d'une planète sur laquelle la vie aurait existé depuis longtemps. (Edmund Gosse, 1907).

In other words, God, in creating the world, hid fossils in rocks to test the faith of geologists by subjecting them to temptation. This is the pitiful solution proposed by Gosse in his book *Omphalos* (1857), a desperate effort to reconcile the Bible and geology. The Anglican priest and social novelist Charles Kingsley judges it harshly, writing that it presents God as an imposter. We could just as easily say that he makes him a joker and his creation into a gigantic store of practical jokes.

Ce système qui nous paraît aujourd'hui grotesque – et qui ruine la réputation scientifique de son auteur – mérite une tout autre réponse que le rire car il est en réalité tragique. C'est la réaction d'un homme qui souffre, d'un homme aux abois, déchiré comme beaucoup d'autres victoriens par un insoutenable conflit intérieur. La tragédie est générale et nous voyons que son moment le plus aigu est marqué par la publication de *On the Origin of Species*. On a une peine, de nos jours, à imaginer les précautions dont Darwin et ses partisans s'entourèrent, et que, deux ans avant d'oser publier son livre, il ait cru nécessaire d'y préparer ainsi l'opinion par des allusions discrètes et des chuchotements sous le manteau. Et malgré tout cela, le livre explosa comme une bombe...

This system which seems grotesque to us today – and which ruins the scientific reputation of its author – deserves a completely different response than laughter because it is in reality tragic. It is the reaction of a suffering man, a man in dire straits, torn like many other Victorians by an unbearable inner conflict. The tragedy is general and we see that its most acute moment is marked by the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. It is difficult, these days, to imagine the precautions with which Darwin and his supporters surrounded themselves, and that, two years before daring to publish his book, he thought it necessary to prepare public opinion for it by discreet allusions and secret whispers. And despite all this, the book exploded like a bomb...

We had to wait until 1884 to finally hear these reasonable words fall from the mouth of Temple, then Bishop of Exeter, later Archbishop of Canterbury: "There is no more reason to dismiss geology, on the pretext that it does not agree in detail with Genesis, than to dismiss astronomy on the pretext that, throughout the *Old Testament*, the sun is described as revolving around the earth." (Neil deGrasse Tyson Reinterprets Genesis, after many years of tumult and confusion, it was finally the voice of common sense).

## b- Literature and Science

The way in which literature should relate to science was at the center of the literary debate in the 1880s, when Zola and the naturalist novel were asserting themselves in France. But Hardy explicitly opposes the latter on this point. Let us recall that in *The Experimental Novel*, published in 1880, Zola explains the issues of the "experimental method applied to the novel" and speaks out in favor of a "literature determined by science" (Emile Zola, 1).

Convinced by medical science and by the theory of Claude Bernard in particular that absolute determinism governs human behavior as it governs raw matter, Zola defines the naturalist novel as a mode of scientific approach to reality which he opposes to the "idealist" or "romantic" novel. According to him, we must put an end to literature which is based on the idea that there is an element of the unknown in the universe, and does not take note of scientific discoveries. On the contrary, he defines his fictional work as a scientific experiment, testing hypotheses, based on the contributions of modern science: "it therefore wants to be doubly scientific, both by its method and by its objects" (Emile Zola, 1). For Zola, two discoveries were decisive: the theories of heredity and the Darwinian theory, which he essentially reduced to the question of the "environment".

In 1891, Hardy responded to Zola in an article entitled *The Science of Fiction* asking him to make a concession on the terms and that we can indeed consider that there is an element of science in art – Hardy rejects Zola's conception of the novel and cites him explicitly. What he rejects is the idea that the scientific method can be applied to the novel. Indeed, science: « can have no part or share in the construction of a story » (Hardy, 261) because the art of writing a story requires a strong and subjective intervention from the author. He describes the Zolian project as an "error" even if he shares its objective: to achieve the "true truth" which is an expression dear to Zola. Hardy then defines the art and talent of the novelist as he conceives them in these terms; the novelist is the one who has a power of observation coming from his strong interior: « a power of observation informed by a living heart » (Hardy, 264) that is a faculty of observation informed by a sensitive heart capable of having an appreciation of the manifestations of life: « sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all its manifestations ». There can therefore be no question of applying a method to be a good novelist. For Hardy, if fiction is indeed a mode of knowing reality – since it aims to know the truth – it is not on the same ground

as science. If literature can be compared to the latter, it is only by its object – knowledge of reality – but in no case by a method. He takes note of the scientific discoveries of his time but he recontextualizes them and questions them in his novels. Hardy's view of the world is fundamentally poetic. In his novels, he also thematizes the opposition between a scientific – or rational – and poetic approach to existence. Many people who read criticism of a form of positivism would like us to be able to know everything exclusively through science.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the incomprehension that arises between Tess and Angel comes from their opposing ways of apprehending reality. Angel is a reasoner, an avatar of the scientist, while Tess, according to Angel's own expression: « isbrim full of poetry – actualized poetry » (Hardy, 261). The narrator constantly underlines the erroneous views of the male character, whose convictions take precedence over experience and the senses, like the man of science (or letters) who would try to submit reality to his theories. On the contrary, Tess trusts her instincts and acts justly, even if she ends up dying condemned. Furthermore, his poetic apprehension of things leads him to consider nature as a mystery. Which contributes to making her a figure of the romantic poet, the very one that Zola targets in his essay and that Hardy, on the contrary, seems to value in his novel. Tess's poetic apprehension of life is opposed to Angel's rational or scientific approach. Tess touches on the “real truth” where Angel goes wrong. Which suggests that Hardy's relationship with science is located in a much more romantic than naturalist perspective. C'est d'ailleurs bien à un traitement poétique que Hardy, conformément à ce qu'il énonce dans « The Science of fiction », soumet les découvertes darwiniennes qui le marquent profondément. Car loin de se livrer à un exercice de mise en intrigue de la théorie darwinienne, il en intègre des éléments dans une recreation toute personnelle. Les textes de Darwin apparaissent d'abord comme des intertextes, des réservoirs d'images, des objets de questionnement, parfois réinvestis dans une perspective purement poétique. Il en va ainsi d'une description d'oiseaux qui semble directement puisée dans *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Travaillant à Flintcomb-Ash, elle aperçoit d'étranges oiseaux arrivant du pôle nord, face auxquels elle a une réaction de rejet :

[...] strange birds from the North Pole began to arrive silently on the upland of Flintcomb-Ash ; gaunt, spectral creatures with tragical eyes – eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived, in curdling temperatures that no man could endure ; which had beheld the crash of icebergs and the slide of snow-hills by the shooting light of the Aurora ; been half blinded by the whirl of colossal storms and terraqueous distortions ; and retained the expression of feature that such scenes had engendered. These nameless birds came quite near to Tess and Marian, but of all they had seen which humanity would never see, they brought no account. (Hardy, 306)

This species of bird unknown to our region – “nameless” – is particularly worrying for Tess and seems summoned to give a vision of the immense diversity of life at a time when Tess thinks of Angel, who has gone to Brazil, another distant and unknown land which worries her. But this frightening species also appears at a time of great distress for Tess, who is working alone and abandoned in the winter cold. When nature is dysphoric in the novel, it is always in resonance with Tess's misfortunes; It is not a question here of giving a negative or positive vision of the environment, but rather of poetically motivating the descriptions, in the tradition of the landscape without qualms.

Furthermore, the appearance of these birds does not take away their element of mystery. They keep all their secrets. Hardy strives to emphasize the part of mystery that remains in existence and in the living. The importance he gives to chance and its recurring use in the very construction of the novel also go in this direction since they seem to betray a refusal of determinism and the law, suggesting that we cannot scientifically explain the mysterious logic of a destiny. Thus, twice, Tess is thrown into misfortune because her letters do not reach Angel. Likewise, the narrator emphasizes that if Tess and Angel had met at the beginning of the novel, misfortune could have been spared them:

Enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment; a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroït delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing-strange destinies. (Hardy, 55).

In this passage, a pure “delay” leading to a whole series of misfortunes came to break a whole beautiful chain of causality. Hardy uses coincidences, delays and other setbacks to introduce play into determinism and assert his arbitrariness as a novelist in the construction of the novel.

### c- Literary and Social Context:

The pessimism of Thomas Hardy, a Victorian author, manifests itself through a worldview where fate and unfortunate circumstances seem to constantly plague the characters, often faced with death, loss and disillusionment. His pessimism is deep and tinged with a melancholy which permeates his work, both in poetry and in novels. Hardy is part of a current of pessimistic thought that runs through Victorian literature, marked by disillusionment with progress and social change. His novels denounce the hypocrisy, rigid social conventions and inequalities of Victorian society, which prevent individual fulfillment and lead to suffering. Deterministic thinking, which denies the freedom of the individual and attributes events to external causes, may have influenced his fatalistic view of life. In essence, Hardy's gloomy vision is a complex interplay of personal experiences, philosophical ideas, and observations of the human condition, all of which contribute to his powerful and enduring portrayal of life's darker aspects, according to literary critics. Hardy experiments with Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragic models in the novel form so as to convey the tragic possibilities of the actual life of his age, helping him to develop the modern tragic novel and to universalize the tragic suffering of the common man.

Mandel regards the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as a "substantive one" (1968, 11). Though no one regards Aristotle's definition as perfect, it seems impossible to enter into a serious discussion of tragedy without referring back to that first and most helpful approach. In *Poetics*, Aristotle gives a detailed examination of each element of tragedy which in this or that way throws light on the nature of the tragic works of innumerable playwrights, ranging from the ancient Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Elizabethan dramatists Shakespeare, Kyd and Marlow, modern playwrights such as Arthur Miller, and finally to writers of modern tragic novels like Hardy, Lawrence and Conrad. In *Poetics*, Aristotle's substantive definition of tragedy is briefly expressed as follows: « Tragedy then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of a narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of this emotion » (Bate, 22). For him, tragedy is a play of some length that tells a noble story in its entirety, in metrical language, that relies on deep suffering causing terror that involves the spectator to acquire an emotional reality. Mandel's definition is a fairly similar one. It runs as follows:

A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose on action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave or physical suffering (Bate, 22).

It is interesting to note that the words "magnitude," "serious" and "action" are used in both definitions, and in fact Mandel's largely repeats Aristotle's concept. The main difference is Aristotle's emphasis on the emotional effect, which is not a structural element but a quality of tragedy.

## Conclusion

The immensity of the world, the diversity of life, are also promises for Hardy, who sees them as an invitation to relativize moral and social laws by placing them in a global context. The discovery of a profound diversity of species and their common origin offers the possibility of discovering other modes of organization of society. Darwin's theories bring a profound change of perspective on human existence, the positive impact of which Hardy emphasizes. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he returns to the main aspects of Darwinian theory to put them to the test of his imagination. Taking part in the scientific and philosophical debate that agitated Victorian England, he proposed a vision of nature as a living organism driven by solidarity and not only by competition. He thus invites us to take into consideration the ethical implications of Darwinism, making *Tess* an idealistic character, an apostle of a conception of society and life based on altruism, thanks to which all the parts of the great organism that is the universe can be united. The Hardyan vision of the world subtly combines the achievements of modern science with romantic beliefs. If Hardy is aware of the cruel implications of the theory of evolution, such as atheism, he is also convinced that "the death of God" makes man fully responsible for the future of the evolution of human societies. In this sense, the theory of evolution, to the extent that it is accompanied by a deep belief in nature, can and must become the instrument for refounding society.

Hardy himself was sadly offended by what he considered as invalid charges. He sought to justify his view of life on many occasions and in various ways. In defense of himself and in a conversation with William Archer in 1904 (quoted in *A Hardy Companion* by F. B. Pinion) he said '...I believe, indeed, that a good deal of the robustious, swaggering optimism, of recent literature is at bottom cowardly and insincere...my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs...On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist... What are my books but one long plea against man's inhumanity against man—to women—and to the lower animals?' (Mathur, 1982, 23) Hardy attempted a justification of his dark outlook when he declared that 'the highest flights of the pen are mostly the excursions and revelations of souls unreconciled to life. Consequently he regarded himself as a 'meliorist' rather than a 'pessimist.' Throughout his relatively long life Hardy witnessed and embraced a record of depressive cycles and colonizing wars and competitions leading up to World War One, which had its negative ramifications on life aspects and sadly destroyed one's hope for mankind and humanity at large. The implied remark we need to articulate and stress is the fact that the genuine cause of his pessimism was not simply his loss of faith in God from having reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* as a young novelist, but his loss of faith in the political leaders of his Victorian society, both Conservative and Labor alike.

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William Archer, *Real conversations*, London, 1904, p.46-47. L'auteur attribue les propos suivants à Hardy : « Mon pessimisme – s'il s'agit de pessimisme – ne signifie pas que j'affirme que le monde va à vau-l'eau... Au contraire, ma philosophie pratique est clairement mélioriste. Que sont mes livres si ce n'est un même plaidoyer contre « l'inhumanité de l'homme envers l'homme », la femme, et les animaux inférieurs ?... Quels que soient le bien ou le mal qui sont inhérents à la vie, il est certain que les hommes la rendent bien pire qu'elle n'a besoin d'être... » (ma traduction)

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