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Desire and the Expressive Eye

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is being published jointly by FATHOM and the *Hardy Review* as part of a collaborative work.

- In the wake of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), questions were raised about the role played by evolution in our existence and the nature of human emotions. In 1887, the Aristotelian Society met to focus on questions on the intellect, passions and will within this context, such as whether mind is synonymous with consciousness, what takes place in a voluntary action, and the difference between will and desire¹. Such concerns intrigued Hardy, whose first *Literary Notebook* opens with his sketch of a tree, labelled "Humanity", that grows out of three interlocking roots representing "Intellect", "Passions" and "Will" (Hardy 1974, 2). The first page of this notebook, which Hardy began to compile as early as the 1860s, reveals an interest that evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, as motive forces behind human behaviour were increasingly viewed within the context of a broader contemporary debate over free will and determinism. Lord Kelvin's metaphor of the world as a machine fed into this debate, as did Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which pointed to biological forces operating on each individual, compromising free will. Hardy's concern with the concept of the will in a seemingly deterministic universe has been examined in studies that have pointed to scientific and philosophical influences, considering the influences of Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, W. T. Clifford and James Sully². These studies often focus on Hardy's development of the concept of the Immanent

Will as an unconscious energy behind phenomena that could potentially evolve and develop consciousness, or have been concerned with the biological compulsion underlying sexual selection. Hardy attested to a breadth of philosophical and scientific influences on his work, including Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill. (Hardy 1982, 6: Letter to Ernest Brennecke, 21st June 1924) and toward the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy's reading also included articles and reviews published in *Mind: a Quarterly Review of Philosophy*, a publication that provided a forum for debate on contemporary issues in philosophy and psychology. A question that emerged in late-nineteenth-century publications in these disciplines was to what extent man differs from a machine. In 1884, drawing together evolutionary theory and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, J. S. Haldane published "Life and Mechanism", in which he examined the difference between an organism, such as man, and a machine, such as a steam-engine.³ While Haldane noted that both man and machine consume fuel and expend energy, the difference, he argued, is that while, according to the law of entropy, a machine will cease to function, energy is reinvested in a living organism to ensure its continued survival. Haldane questioned whether a living organism's ability to adapt to circumstances was inbuilt or consciously applied. Such a speculation finds an interesting fictional analogue in Hardy's "On the Western Circuit" (1891), which examines the machinery that propels human action and, in the process, explores the nature of will and desire.

- 2 "On the Western Circuit" opens with the arrival of Charles Raye, a visitor to Melchester, whose attention is drawn away from the austere, lifeless setting of an empty Cathedral that he had intended to visit, and toward the vitality of a fair-ground that is temporarily resident in the city square. He hears a noise "compounded of steam barrel-organs, the clanging of gongs the ringing of hand-bells, the clack of rattles, and the undistinguishable shouts of men" (Hardy 1988, 455). We are to learn that this is a steam-circus, or merry-go-round, but initially it is merely a discordant machine that is at odds with the environment in which it has been placed, establishing a binary division of natural/unnatural as the first of a set of opposites that will be interrogated in the story. We are told that Raye "might have searched over Europe for a greater contrast between juxtaposed scenes", but no sooner are such contrasts and oppositions established in the story than they immediately collapse with the narrator's observation that: "The spectacle was that of the eighth chasm of the Inferno as to colour and flame, and, as to mirth, a development of the Homeric heaven" (455). The steam-circus, the focal point of the visitor's attention, is also of indeterminate nature, a complex amalgamation of the machine world and the natural world, featuring human figures "like gnats against a sunset", propelled forward on the backs of mechanical horses (455). The narrator notes that "[t]heir motions were so rhythmical that they seemed to be moved by machinery. And it presently appeared that they were moved by machinery indeed" (455), inviting the reader to examine the forces that drive human action in this story as a whole.
- 3 A merry-go-round is a very curious thing, the enjoyment of it dependent on the willing surrender of bodily volition. Viewing the figures on the merry-go-round, Charles Raye finds himself attracted by the appearance of a young woman who has abandoned herself to the experience of being propelled up and down on a mechanized horse. Hardy fully exploits the sexual implications of such a device as a means for introducing lovers, describing the propulsion of the "temporary erection" and its effects on "throbbing humanity" (Hardy 1988, 455). Anna is "absolutely unconscious of everything save the act of riding", her features "rapt in an ecstatic dreaminess" so that she appears "as happy as

if she were in a Paradise" (457). Raye's paying to secure Anna a place on the merry-go-round for another ride seems to be an act of volition, but his free will is immediately brought into question when he is described as "dreading the moment when the inexorable stoker, grimly lurking behind the glittering rococo-work should decide that this set of riders had had their pennyworth, and bring the whole concern of steam-engine, horses, mirrors, trumpets, drums, cymbals, and such-like to pause and silence" (457). The steam-circus machine is set in motion through human agency, but the direction and duration of the mechanized ride are predetermined. The exposure of the workings of the machine thus reveal the story's central concern with the nature of desire. What seems at first to be a Paradise of free will is, in fact, more like the hell of determinism.

- 4 For much of the opening scene of "On the Western Circuit" the central characters are unnamed, as underlying the interest in the specific unique circumstances of the individuals featured in the story is an exploration of the nature of desire as a universal experience. Raye's selection of Anna, which he believes to be an act of free will may in fact, it appears, be a biologically-determined process of sexual selection fuelled by universally-experienced desire. Initially we are introduced to a gentlemanly young fellow who is "unlike the majority of the crowd", but sexual desire pays no respect to individuality or to class hierarchies, and by the end of the chapter he has cast off his social role and is reduced to the same level as the rest of the figures in the scene as he joins the "motley crowd" (Hardy 1988, 458). As Raye loses his individuality by joining the crowd, he also loses his self-mastery, as he becomes subject to the effects of desire. Desire is centred in the gaze, and the universality of Raye's experience is aptly suggested by his name, which conjures up the idea of beam extending between the viewer and the subject. While theories of the gaze are often predicated on an assumption that power is held by the surveyor, in "On the Western Circuit" visual fascination results in the suspension of the viewer's self-mastery. Raye's selection may be an act of choice, or merely Darwinian sexual selection, but once it has taken place, the gaze is subject to the will of the machine; having selected Anna, Raye "waited for her every reappearance, glancing indifferently over the intervening forms [...] till his select country beauty followed on again in her place" (457). It is the intermittency of Anna's appearance that sustains Raye's desire; his loss of control over his vision of Anna as she is whirled around by the steam-circus, paradoxically makes her, for Raye, a fixed image, "the fixed point in an undulating, dazzling, lurid universe" (458). She becomes for Raye a mere fantasy of his own construction that has no reference to any reality attached to her or her consciousness (see Lacan 67-119). Over time, Raye's fantasy of "pink and breezy Anna" as a product of nature is consolidated into a fixed image (Hardy 1988, 457, 464)⁴. The story thus reveals the predetermined course of desire overriding free will and the loss of self-mastery associated with desire.
- 5 According to John Berger's analysis of the gaze, a man's presence is dependent on the promise of power that he embodies, while women are subordinate to this power and can only have a limited agency, operating within a man's field of vision. Thus "Men act. Women appear" (Berger 47). "On the Western Circuit" undercuts any assumption that the male gaze is associated with power. Not only is the gaze associated with loss of self-mastery but the power relations between the sexes that Berger associates with the male gaze appears to be reversed; while men become mechanical, it is women who act, and, rather than being objectified and denied agency, invisibly maintain power. Having begun

his descent into the mechanized state prompted by desire at the end of the first chapter, Raye becomes subject to other factors that determine his fate. The second chapter introduces us to the middle-class household of Mr and Mrs Harnham, a childless couple who have taken Anna in as an orphaned young woman. We are later to learn that Edith Harnham's facility for manipulating desire has secured her a husband, while, up to the point at which the story begins, she has not herself succumbed to desire and the loss of self-control that it entails. In the opening scene of the second chapter, going to find her young charge at the fairground, Edith sees the relationship between Charles and Anna begin. Thus far, the relationship arises naturally through the mechanical forces of desire – Anna states quite truthfully: "I didn't capture him. I didn't do anything" – but Edith intervenes so that the natural, mechanical forces of nature operating between Charles and Anna are superseded by the machinations of Edith, with her carefully manufactured letters that she writes to hide Anna's illiteracy (Hardy 1988, 461).

- 6 Mindful of contemporary debates over the nature of human will, Hardy examines the unconscious motivations behind Edith Harnham's machinations in "On the Western Circuit". The narrator describes the "process of manufacture" of the letters, and Edith's efforts to throw into her tone "mechanical passiveness" in her reading of Charles's responses (Hardy 1988, 467, 466). There is an art to maintaining this appearance of neutrality, but ultimately nature supersedes art. What begins as an artificial process then becomes subordinate to desire that has, from the outset of the story, been linked with mechanization. Edith's desire, prompted by physical contact, leads to an attraction on a socio-cultural level, which Edith recognizes as a "magnetic reciprocity" between them (467). But this connection does not diminish or supplant the physical element of her attraction to Raye. Disillusioned by her marriage (brought about on account of her social parity with Mr Harnham), Edith is sexually drawn to Raye. Edith's intervention into the incipient relationship between Charles and Anna happens literally and physically at first. Raye, mistaking Edith for Anna, clasps her hand. In Edith's intervention into Charles and Anna's relationship we see Lacan's *objet petit a* in play, seemingly controlled by Edith, but the story also illustrates Thomas Huxley's analysis of the subordination of free will to the deterministic nature of desire. In "On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata" (1874), Thomas Huxley arrived at the conclusion that "we are conscious automata endowed with free will in the only intelligible sense of that much-abused term – inasmuch as in many respects we are able to do as we like – but none the less parts of the great series of causes and effects which, in unbroken continuity, composes that which is, and has been and shall be – the sum of existence" (Huxley 244)⁵. The animalistic nature of Edith's response is acknowledged in the description of her as "an interesting creature rather than a handsome woman", a "she-animal"; she is only differentiated by her artfulness from Anna, who is described as a "domestic animal who humbly heard but understood not" (Hardy 1988, 473).
- 7 In "On the Metaphysics of Sexual Love", Schopenhauer notes that "this high importance of [love] is not a question of individual weal and woe, as in all other matters, but of the existence and special constitution of the human race in times to come; therefore the will of the individual appears at an enhanced power as the will of the species" (Schopenhauer 534). Just as Schopenhauer conceives of a "life force" that overrides environmental forces, Haldane's observation of the power of a living organism to adapt its actions to unusual circumstances is linked with the reinvestment of energy and the instinct for reproduction. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) reflects this understanding of desire as a

"life force" or energy serving the interests of procreation. Jude Fawley is described as obeying "conjunctive orders" from headquarters that are "unconsciously received" in a manner that renders him, for a time, incapable of exerting his will to further his ambitions and career prospects (Hardy 2002, 34). She can read exactly what is happening through her interpretation of his gaze, elicited infamously by her assault on Jude's head with the "characteristic part of a barrow pig" (33). Ingham notes that in the manuscript, Hardy amended the wording of this phrase twice; first he wrote "in the automatic operation of a normal law" and then "in obedience to *procreative* orders from headquarters", each highlighting that Jude's response is automatic rather than willed (401n). While Jude's will is subordinated to Arabella's machinations, ultimately her will is motivated by a temporary instinct that she cannot understand and that is linked with her connection throughout the narrative to animal instinct. Likewise, in the selection process at play in "On the Western Circuit" – in Charles's gazing at Anna, and in Edith's desire for Charles – may be seen the life force that Schopenhauer conceives of not as the will of the individual, but the will of the species. Charles's desire for Anna leads to her pregnancy, while Edith's machinations are subordinated to her natural inclinations, from the moment that Anna is pregnant and Edith wishes she herself were carrying Raye's child. Thus, any sense of free will in relation to desire is undermined in "On the Western Circuit". As Schopenhauer writes: "nature can attain her end only by implanting in the individual a certain *delusion*, and by virtue of this, that which in truth is merely a good thing for the species, seems to him to be a good thing for himself, so that he serves the species, whereas he is under the delusion that he is serving himself" (Schopenhauer 538). Through sublimating her desires through the artful craft of writing, and denying her feelings out of solidarity with Anna, Edith's machinations, rather than serving her self-interest, result in the marriage of Charles and Anna, who are expecting a child. The mechanical nature of desire wins out and, with a sense of fatalism, of an acceptance of forces beyond the characters' control, the story concludes on a grim note of determinism after the marriage of Anna and Charles; Edith is described as walking "mechanically" homeward, Anna is described as "tied up", and she and Charles are propelled mechanically to their future via the machinery of the train. The story closes with Raye reading all the letters signed Anna "with dreary resignation", as he discovers that he has been duped all along by the machinations of two women, but, on a more fundamental level, deluded by the nature of desire.

- 8 Before settling on "On the Western Circuit" for his title, Hardy considered "The Amanuensis" or "The Writer of the Letters". Each of the rejected titles highlights the autobiographical elements of the story, Hardy himself having acted as an amanuensis for young women in Dorchester, who wished to write love letters to their sweethearts when they were serving as soldiers abroad (Hardy 1999, 67). But in changing the title of his story from "The Amanuensis" to "On the Western Circuit", Hardy offered a much more fitting title for a story that is concerned with the law, and the institutionalized regulation of human desires. In a story that depicts human endeavours to exert individual free will against inescapable determinism that serves the interest of the human race as a whole, the results of the story highlight forces that are beyond human control – biological determinism, sexuality and class. These forces cannot be overcome, but they can be analysed and understood, and the narrator of "On the Western Circuit" ultimately regains the control that is lost with the gaze of desire, through the application of the gaze of objectivity.⁶ In a letter of 1902, Hardy remarked, "Well: what we gain by science is, after all, sadness, as the Preacher saith. The more we know of the laws and nature of the

Universe the more ghastly a business one perceives it all to be – and the non-necessity of it” (Hardy 1982, 5: Letter to Edward Clodd, 27th February 1902), as he reflected on his capacity to analyse human emotions in order to transcend the irrational forces of Nature.

- 9 In “On the Western Circuit”, having applied the distanced gaze of the disinterested spectator to his subject matter, Hardy writes a cautionary tale that points to the transient and migratory nature of desire. While it is a story that analyses the gaze of Charles Raye, and the machinations of Edith to secure Charles and Anna’s marriage, “On the Western Circuit” brings another gaze into play: the examining eye that was applied in the nineteenth century to all forms of life that could be regulated: the body, the soul and human sexuality. Foucault writes: “There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze that each individual under its weight will end by [internalising] to the point that they are their own overseer, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against themselves” (Foucault 155). “On the Western Circuit” is not merely a story about desire, but is a story that foregrounds the analysis of desire, highlighted by an extra-diegetic gaze toward a readership, in what is one of the most sudden and jarring narrative intrusions in nineteenth-century fiction. When the narrator describes the moment of Charles and Anna gazing at each other for the first time, there is a sharp differentiation between the natural reaction they experience, in a sensory haze that involves a loss of control, and the judgment of the narrator who can read the scene’s significance with Foucault’s analytical gaze: “they gazed at each other with smiles, and with that unmistakable expression which means so little at the moment, yet so often leads up to passion, heart-ache, union, disunion, devotion, overpopulation, drudgery, content, resignation, despair” (Hardy 1988, 458). This is the point at which the theme of the story becomes explicit for the first time, highlighting as it does that the merry-go-round is not just a device for bringing Charles and Anna together but is, in fact, a metaphor for desire. In shifting from “passion”, which suggests free will, to the “despair” of determinism, the narrator’s interjection highlights that desire itself is mechanized, a sort of propulsion that in a broader sense takes control in the forward movement of our lives, with a typical outcome: sexual desire, marriage, children, and the end of passion. What lies in the future for each individual in a relationship that begins with desire is disparity, whether socio-cultural or temperamental in nature.
- 10 “On the Western Circuit” is concerned with circulatory systems that are regulated by varying levels of control. On one level is the circulatory system of desire (‘le circuit de la pulsion’, Lacan, Seminar XI), represented in the revolving movement of the merry-go-round⁷. This is reflected in the circular relationship that develops between Charles, Anna and Edith, a relationship that is sustained by the circulatory system of the postal services. The title, “On the Western Circuit”, points to another circulatory system and another significantly autobiographical element of the story, namely, the legal profession shared by Raye and Hardy. The circulatory systems may be seen in the story as a series of ever-widening circles representing a hierarchy of perspectives. Each individual in the story is at a different level in this hierarchy, with Anna purely subject to the mechanical nature of desire as it is defined by Schopenhauer. Edith shares some of the ability to distance herself from desire that is held by the narrator/writer to the point that she can use the art of writing and the circulatory system of the postal service to manipulate Raye. The narrator appears to maintain a superior perspective to that of Edith, saying of her marriage: “That contract had left her still a woman whose deeper nature had never been

stirred" (Hardy 1988, 467). Charles Raye can only objectively analyse desire intermittently. We are told that "[t]houghts of unpremeditated conduct, of which a week earlier he would not have believed himself capable, threw him into a mood of dissatisfied depression" (462). That the language used for his analysis of his circumstances (Anna has become pregnant) is given in legal language in the context of Raye returning to his life as a barrister, points to Foucault's analytical and regulatory gaze, the gaze that Hardy's narrator deploys. Jonathan Schroeder notes, "to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (Schroeder 58). While Charles Raye can philosophically reflect on desire from a distance, when he "mended his pens with a mind far away from the case in progress", the narrator applies a removed, analytical gaze while watching each character drawn toward the "pleasure-machine" (Hardy 1988, 462). In distinguishing himself from these characters, he notably sets himself apart from the lawyer Raye, coolly commenting on his immanent social and intellectual fall:

As he stood smiling there in the motley crowd, with his pipe in his hand, and clad in the rough pea-jacket and wideawake that he had put on for his stroll, who could have supposed him to be Charles Bradford Raye, Esquire, stuff-gownsmen, educated at Wintonchester, called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, now going the Western Circuit, merely detained in Melchester by a small arbitration after his brethren had moved on to the next county-town. (Hardy 1988, 458-459)

- 11 The distanced perspective seems to reflect the superiority of the narrator, who has not only mastered the nature of desire, but can also see how desire is circumscribed by the law, another deterministic force that inhibits free will. However, Hardy's reflections on the levels of understanding of Nature's operation revealed to him that humanity as a whole is deceived by "The Hypocrisy of things. Nature is an arch-dissembler. A child is deceived completely; the older members of society more or less according to their penetration; though even they seldom get to realize that *nothing* is as it appears." (Hardy 1984, 182) While there may be a hierarchy of perspectives, as Hardy is aware, our position as cogs in the machine of Nature precludes the possibility of remote, analytical spectatorship. Just as Raye's penmanship does not remove him from the object of his analysis and he is drawn back toward the object of his desire, thus Hardy's analytical gaze is inherently subjective and driven by the force it is trying to control. Like Raye, Hardy is driven by the circulatory system of a process of involvement-removal-analysis (see Miller, 1970) and, like Edith Harnham, his authorial machinations that are meant to have a distancing effect, only enmesh him further into experiencing that which he would view analytically. At best, he can only analyse the circulatory system of desire-gaze-authorship and conclude by focusing on the failure of efforts to control desire through writing. In conclusion to this metanarrative, Charles reflects on the outcome of the story as he reads the letters that reflect the failure of efforts to control desire. In response to being asked what he is doing, as though he can enact his own will, he replies: "Reading over all those sweet letters to me signed 'Anna' [...] with dreary resignation." (Hardy 1988, 477)

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NOTES

1. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1887-1888), pp. 74-90 lists 'Symposium: Is Mind Synonymous with Consciousness?', 'Symposium: The Distinction between Will and Desire' as symposia held in the first year of the society's existence. Subsequent issues deal with similar themes, with a focus on the relationship between the mind and the body and philosophical speculations about the nature of mind, consciousness, will and desire.
2. Studies of the scientific and philosophical context in which Hardy was writing include Suzanne Keen, *Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2016); Mark Asquith, 'Hardy's Philosophy', *Thomas Hardy in Context*, ed. Phillip Mallet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 285-95; Timothy Hands, "'A Bewildered Child and His Conjurors": Hardy and the Ideas of His Time', *New Perspectives on Thomas Hardy*, ed. Charles P. C. Pettit (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 137-55; Mark Asquith, 'Philosophy, Metaphysics and Music in Hardy's Cosmic Vision', *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Rosemarie Morgan (Farnham: Ashgate, 1988, repr. 2010), 181-197; Harold Orel, 'The Dynasts: Hardy's Contribution to the Epic Tradition', *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 365-370.
3. J. S. Haldane, 'Life and Mechanism', *Mind*, 9.33 (1884), 27-47.
4. Raye's fantasy of Anna as a product of nature is a useful illustration of how 'objet petit a' is related to Lacan's "big Other".
5. Hardy later echoed this philosophy in a letter of 1907 to Edward Wright in which he notes that the conception of 'the Unconscious Will of the Universe' is a theory that 'seems to [...] settle the question of Free-will v. necessity', adding: 'The will of man is ... neither wholly free nor wholly unfree. When swayed by the Universal Will (which he mostly must be as a subservient part of it) he is not individually free; but whenever it happens that all the rest of the Great Will is in equilibrium the minute portion called one person's will is free, just as a performer's fingers will go on playing the pianoforte of themselves when he talks or thinks of something else and the head does not rule them' (*Letters* vol. 3, 255-6, cited in Asquith, 2010, 186).
6. See J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*. Harvard, MA: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press.
7. I am grateful to Annie Ramel for pointing out Lacan's reference to circuitry in relation to desire.

ABSTRACTS

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy's reading included articles and reviews published in *Mind: a Quarterly Review of Philosophy*, a publication that provided a forum for debate on contemporary issues in philosophy and psychology. In the wake of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, these disciplines explored questions related to the role played by evolution in our existence and the nature of human emotions. This paper argues that in "On the Western Circuit" Hardy examines desire in the context of debates over free will and determinism, positing that desire places humankind in a conundrum that involves both loss of an individual's volition and also an increased need to exert free will to secure the object of desire. This paper will also contend that in "On the Western Circuit", Hardy uses regulatory systems, such as the law, to explore the possibility of containing and managing desire, also considering the act of writing itself as a potential tool through which desire can be analysed and controlled.

Les lectures de Thomas Hardy dans les dernières années du dix-neuvième siècle comprenaient des articles et recensions d'ouvrages publiés dans le magazine *Mind: a Quarterly Review of Philosophy* (*L'esprit : mensuel de philosophie*), qui servait de forum aux débats du temps en matière de philosophie et de psychologie. Influencées par la publication de *L'Origine des espèces* de Darwin, ces deux disciplines cherchaient à analyser l'impact du processus d'évolution sur notre mode de vie et sur la nature des émotions humaines. Cet article utilise la nouvelle « On the Western Circuit » pour montrer comment Hardy interroge la nature du désir, à la lumière des débats contemporains sur le déterminisme ou le libre arbitre. Il démontre que le désir confronte l'être humain à un paradoxe : tout en abdiquant à l'autre sa volonté, il impose dans le même temps tout son libre arbitre pour s'assurer l'objet de son désir. L'article montre en outre que dans cette nouvelle, Hardy explore la manière dont des institutions telles que la loi tentent de contenir et de réguler les désirs ; l'acte d'écriture lui-même devient alors un instrument visant à analyser et contrôler le désir.

INDEX

Mots-clés: désir, regard, déterminisme, évolutionnisme, libre arbitre, philosophie, psychologie, volonté

oeuvre citée On the Western Circuit

Keywords: desire, gaze, volition, philosophy, psychology, free will, determinism, evolutionism

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