

“LEAPING OVER OBLIVION”: THOMAS HARDY’S “MOMENTS OF VISION”

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1. *Moments of Vision* (1916) is Thomas Hardy’s fifth volume of poems, after *Wessex Poems* (1898), *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901), *Time’s Laughingstocks* (1909) and *Satires of Circumstance* (1914)¹. Only two more volumes of poetry, *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1923) and *Human Shows* (1925), were to be published in his lifetime, before his *Winter Words*, which came out posthumously in 1928. This mere list of titles would suffice to show Hardy’s constant preoccupation with Time in his verse—as if by discarding novel-writing shortly after the uproar caused by the publication of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895², the author had deliberately turned from the creation of a universe that predominantly existed in space—the Wessex of the novels—to the more essential, philosophical and ontological questions put to man by Time.
2. However, one should beware of such linear or bipolar understanding of Hardy’s career, for he always referred to poetry as the one passion of his life and his first mode of expression, long before he even contemplated launching himself into novel-writing. The poem “Domicilium”, which opens the whole of his collected poems with reminiscences of his native place, was composed in 1857-60, some ten years before his first unpublished—and destroyed—novel *The Poor Man and the Lady* (1868). And in all his collections of poems, Hardy systematically refused all-too obvious chronological classifications, re-inserting old material within newly-written verse, in what Joseph Hillis Miller called a “juxtaposition of unrelated, even discordant, effusions”; but to Hillis Miller, “[t]he poems *should* be read in all the ostentatious disorder of the *Complete Poems*. This ordering in disorder is a matter of radical discord and irrelation”³.
3. *Moments of Vision* illustrates this temporal discord, by presenting poems written in 1913-16⁴ alongside with older pieces for which vague dates are occasionally offered⁵, going as far back as

1 See J. Gibson, ed., *The Complete Poems – The New Wessex Edition*. Hereafter mentioned in the text as *CP*.

2 Only one more novel, *The Well-Beloved* (1897), was to follow *Jude*, immediately before Hardy passed on to poetry and short-story writing.

3 J. H. Miller, *The Linguistic Moment – from Wordsworth to Stevens*, 271, 273. Emphasis mine.

4 In my study of the volume *Moments of Vision*, I will deliberately leave aside the last part gathering the “Poems of War and Patriotism” (*CP*, 538-553), which are obviously more topical and raise very distinct questions from the rest of the book.

5 Hardy’s “Lines To a Movement in Mozart’s E-Flat Symphony” bear the indication “Begun November 1898”; “Love

1869. Sometimes, the date for the episode or the events in the poem appears explicitly within the title or subtitle, firmly anchoring the vision within the past⁶. Many of the poems are thus signalled from the very title as relying on a retrospective movement, with sudden flashes of memory taking on new meaning in retrospect, or places revisited and re-assessed, in a back-and-forth movement which provides the dominant structure for the whole volume: one in which a particular episode of the past is reread and reinterpreted in the light of the present moment, and vice versa. Time thus becomes “the medium of a necessary discontinuity”⁷ in two senses at least: first in that the collection consists in a haphazard juxtaposition of distinct moments of experience or “records of diverse times”⁸; and secondly, in that it works mostly through the process of comparison of past and present—the two being revealed to be both distinct yet strictly indissociable, as already hinted by the title of Hardy’s earlier collection *Poems of the Past and the Present*, in which the conjunction “and” should be understood to take its full meaning, not as mere juxtaposition but as an intimate interfusion—though not union—of two moments of experience.

4. This paper will attempt to explore Hardy’s refusal of, or incapacity to imagine, a unity of time, treating it instead as a series of fragmented moments which may be revisited, recalled, revived, only to point the despairing disjunctions between now and then, here and there. It will first try to unravel the different intellectual models which partly conditioned Hardy’s complex, and often inconsistent, views of temporality: the Darwinian theory of evolution, a vision of Fate largely derived from Greek tragedy, and a rather modern view of a chaotic universe dominated by “chance and change”⁹... It will then concentrate more precisely on the recurrent confrontation between present instants and past experiences vividly recalled, in a pattern reminiscent of the Romantic concept of “Spots of time”. Yet Hardy’s treatment in fact results in suggestions opposed to those of Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems. In Hardy’s poems, as in Wordsworth’s meditations, a particular location or a favourite “spot” often opens up a whole flux of memories. But Hardy seems to duplicate this memorial structure with almost parodic intentions at times: instead of yielding a moment of epiphany, of harmony, or of appeasement in the bosom of nature, the movement of the

the Monopolist” is tantalisingly presented as “Begun 1871: finished —”; “The Young Glass-Stainer” is dated “Nov. 1893” (*CP*, 468, 479, 532); whereas “The Picture in the Scene”, “Why did I sketch” and “At a Seaside Town in 1869” are presented as developments “From an old note”, and “The Wind’s Prophecy” as “Rewritten from an old copy” (*CP*, 476, 477, 499 & 495).

6 Such is the case for “We Sat at the Window (Bournemouth, 1875)”, “Afternoon Service at Mellstock (Circa 1850)”, “Near Lanivet, 1872”, “In the Seventies”, “A January Night (1879)”, “The Last Signal (11 Oct. 1886) A Memory of William Barnes”, “The Pedestrian – An Incident of 1883”, etc. (*CP*, 428, 429, 436, 459, 466, 473, 502 respectively).

7 J.H. Miller, *The Linguistic Moment*, 274.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Preface to the “Poems of the Past and the Present”, *CP*, 84.

poem rather points the gap between what was expected and what truly happened. Hardy's moments of "vision" are hardly ever moments of "insight" or illumination: rather, they come back obsessively upon the unpredictability of fate, and man's blindness in front of events, following a logic of "The Contretemps", to use the title of a later poem, rather than one of time recovered.

5. To try and give a precise and faithful account of Hardy's understanding of Time, in both his prose and verse, is a daunting and perhaps perilous task, for his works display an improbable aggregation of distinct, and often conflicting, world views. Hardy's "Time" is both measureless and fleeting, linear and wayward, implacable and accidental.
6. As a lover of the Dorset landscapes, which inscribe the visible signs of aeons and aeons of slow transformations, with their tumuli, their fossils and their archaic relics, Hardy is always aware of the larger scale of geological time—a stable, measureless and near-unchanging horizon which encompasses, and indeed belittles, the human span of existence. From that wider temporal perspective, the poet is able to see men's lives as nothing else but transitory moments, the endless and often meaningless repetition of basic biological patterns. As ages follow ages, men's troubles are finally not so very different from those of the many generations that have lived and died before them. Tess, in her simple peasant wisdom, has intuitively sensed that from the larger vantage of the earth's history, her own story is but the repetition of countless others¹⁰—and her last sentence quite tellingly uses repetition to mimic this unavoidable pattern of life¹¹:

What's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'.¹²

7. Tess's remark could be understood as showing Hardy's humanist belief in feelings and reactions common to all men; but it may also owe something to the theory of heredity developed by the French school of Naturalism. From the moment when Parson Tringham very theatrically discloses to John Durbeyfield his glorious ancestry among the aristocratic line of the d'Urbervilles,

10 On this question of history, and novel-writing, as *repetition*, see the brilliant developments of Joseph Hillis Miller in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, 116-146.

11 On Hardy's use of repetitive "patterns", see D. Taylor, "The Patterns in Hardy's Poetry", 258-275.

12 T. Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 99.

it seems that Tess's story is written down once and for all. To Parson Tringham, no better image of the family chronicles may be given than that of Kingsbere Abbey and its "rows and rows of you in your vaults"¹³—an image which clearly anticipates Tess's vision of time as the direct perpetuation of her ancestors' fate, in a "long row". To many around her, including Angel Clare, the events of Tess's life will appear as the mere repetition of a long family history whose origins have faded away in the past but whose end is clear; it is already expressed in an implacable present tense which conveys far more than antiquarian knowledge—it is prophetic: "You are extinct"¹⁴. The whole stock of legends and stories passed on from generation to generation constantly serve to attest the conformity of Tess's fate with a set pattern. History here follows the linear unfolding of one's *lineage*, which appears to determine one's *life-line*.

8. Nowhere is Tess's ascendancy more visible than in her face, which she holds from her mother. Her *lineaments* are literally those of her *line*. And this over-determination of her face may enlighten the violent scene in which she decides to "mercilessly [snip] her eyebrows off" in order to escape the lusting gaze of men¹⁵: by dis-figuring herself, or de-facing the d'Urberville look, Tess is symbolically attempting to free herself from the family line(s), and to break away from her inherited fate. Hardy was well aware of the polysemy of those "lines", for he plays on the word again in the terribly ironical poem entitled "The Rival" (CP 434). In it, a woman grows so jealous of the photograph which her husband fondly treasures—and which she discovers to be of herself in her youth—that she finally destroys "that face of the former me", "taken when I was the season fairest / And time-lines all unknown". Beyond the obvious allusion to the wrinkles which mark the passing of years, one cannot but read in those "time-lines" an allusion to the predestined path the couple's life was to take...

9. Hardy's poem "Heredity" (CP 434) very forcefully sums up this disquieting "moment of vision" when the whole of one's life, either past or to come, reappears in filigree through one's lineaments:

I am the family face;

Flesh perishes, I live on,

Projecting trait and trace

13 T. Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 2.

15 *Ibid.*, 219.

Through time to times anon,
 And leaping from place to place
 Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
 In curve and voice and eye
 Despise the human span
 Of durance – that is I;
 The eternal thing in man,
 That heeds no call to die.

10. The gripping sense of personal dispossession is reinforced by the synecdoche which gives a voice to the face itself instead of to the person, and by the striking use of an eternal present—quite an exception in this volume that mostly gives voice to “memory-obsessed speakers”¹⁶. This present tense conveys the same sense of finality as that used by Parson Tringham in his triumphant assertion of the family’s destiny—and we could note that the poem abruptly stops on the verb “to die”. In both cases, “implacable causes” seem to push “toward a predestined end”¹⁷. But two philosophies in fact seem to vie here. Below the naturalist law of heredity, one guesses that another form of logic is also at work: that of Fate, heard in the sense of Greek tragedy¹⁸. In the poem, the family look becomes a synonym for the family’s *destiny*. This look has the transcendence, the power, the contemptuous superiority of Fate: it survives the decay of the flesh (“flesh perishes, I live on”); it appears to act of its own accord (“projecting” features and “leaping” over time); and it finally mocks or “despises” man’s powerlessness. All that is left to man is a sort of patient and resigned “endurance”, as obliquely readable under the word “durance”... Thus one’s lineaments and life are not only encoded genetically; they also result from a Fate that far transcends pure scientific determination. And it is highly telling that Tess’s life-story, which opens with the disclosure of the discoveries made by the amateur-antiquarian Tringham in the county archives, should finally close

16 D. Taylor, “Hardy and Wordsworth”, 447.

17 J. H. Miller, *The Linguistic Moment, from Wordsworth to Stevens*, 295.

18 In his General Preface to the 1912 Wessex Edition of his Works, Hardy explicitly acknowledged the importance of this literary and philosophical model, speaking enthusiastically of “our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature”. (T. Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, 396).

upon the famous and controversial mention of Aeschylus's "President of the Immortals"¹⁹: beyond the chronological time of family chronicle, Tess is also the "sport" of superior forces. Hardy's last fictions elevate his characters from the time of annals to that of tragic predestination.

11. Yet one cannot stop with these two competing definitions of time in Hardy's work—that of measureless geological time (and, embedded in that larger frame, of family history unfolding as an endless reproduction of similar moments), and that of tragic Fate. Indeed, it is difficult to reason on the notions of heredity, transmission and family determinism in Hardy's thought without evoking Darwin's paramount influence on the writer. In his autobiography, Hardy was proud to present himself as "one of the first acclaimers of the *Origin of Species*"²⁰. He spoke of the theory of evolution as a lesson in humility for man, suddenly made aware of his limited and relative position within the whole universe of living creatures: "The discovery of the law of evolution, which revealed that all organic creatures are one family, shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively"²¹. It is of course not indifferent to our purpose that Hardy should have used the image of a whole organic "family", on the larger background of the evolution of species... The deeply Darwinian, and deeply ironical, poem "Transformations" (CP 472) similarly turns the scales, by describing how the decomposing bodies of men buried at the foot of trees now feed the whole vegetal world, in a grim reversal of hierarchies:

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned into a green shoot.

12. In the poem "The Pedigree", Hardy's knowledge of evolution comes to complicate the vision of a merely linear movement of history. In Darwin's analysis, biological and physiological determinism is not the only cause for the global movement of evolution: to these intrinsic determinations, external parameters have to be added, such as the constant necessity for species to

19 T. Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 314.

20 M. Millgate, ed., *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy – by Thomas Hardy*, 158. Hereafter *Life*.

21 *Ibid.*, 373.

adapt to their own *milieu*, through the two laws of variation and adaptation. Thus organic features are not *only* inherited; they may also vary progressively in time—so that the history of a species, or a family, can no longer be defined as a smooth linear course, but rather as a complex series of modifications, with new organisms constantly branching out of the main species. It is this deeply disorienting experience of a family line suddenly opening up into endless ramifications which is narrated in “The Pedigree” (CP 460). Here too the movement of the poem carries the narrator from the “naïve” time of chronicles in the very first stanza (“I bent in the deep of night / Over a pedigree the chronicler gave / As mine”) to the frightening entanglements of evolutionist genealogy. It is well known that Darwin first schematised his notion of evolution in the shape of a tree, with each new variation of the species adding a new branch to the diagram. In Hardy’s poem, it is the family “tree” which metaphorically turns into a disturbing web of unknown beings in the second stanza—a web which threatens to imprison the speaker/reader rather than enlighten him. The rather erratic layout of the poem, with indentations changing in each stanza, and lines therefore literally stretching and dancing on the page, gives a vivid visual suggestion of this entanglement within growing and branching lines:

So, scanning my sire-sown tree,
 And the hieroglyphs of this spouse tied to that,
 With offspring mapped below in lineage,
 Till the tangles troubled me,
 The branches seemed to twist into a seared and cynic face
 Which winked and tokened towards the window like a Mage
 Enchanting me to gaze again thereat.

13. As the “map” of family history becomes a true maze, methodical “scanning” has to give way to painful deciphering of strange coded signs, or “hieroglyphs”. The quest for knowledge turns into a fantastic process of transmutation, which seems to cast a spell on the reader. What he “sees” under that spell is revealed in the third stanza to be the endless repetition of similar lives, from times immemorial:

It was a mirror now,
 And in it a long perspective I could trace

Of my begetters, dwindling backward each past each

All with the kindred look,

Whose names had since been inked down in their place

On the recorder's book,

Generation and generation of my mien, and build, and brow.

14. Far from allowing the narrator to discover the secret of personal identity, the confrontation with the intricacies of the family tree leaves him with a feeling of radical dispossession and alienation—which ironically re-writes Descartes' "I think therefore I am" into its very negation, in which a being is not himself, but only the imitation (or "counterfeit") of countless others":

Said I then, sunk in tone,

'I am merest mimicker and counterfeit! —

Though thinking *I am I*

And what I do I do myself alone.'²²

15. The "seared and cynic face" of stanza one, which mocks man's attempts at defining himself as an individual rather than the copy of anonymous others, suggests a further key-component in Hardy's incredibly complex temporal imagination: a cynical force or power constantly ready to jeer at men's efforts, which may have derived partly from his readings in Schopenhauer²³. Hardy seems to have borrowed from the German philosopher the notion of an Immanent Will at work everywhere in the universe, and systematically baffling—often with a certain sadistic pleasure—men's attempts to direct the course of their lives. In Hardy's personal redefinition, this Immanent Will is the very opposite of any rational causality. It is a natural impetus, a "thrusting or urging internal force"²⁴, an irresistible impulse that blindly decides the course of things, without any consideration for men. In his autobiography, Hardy comes over and over again to this "Unconscious Will of the Universe"²⁵, for which he strives to give various definitions in turn. These hover between the Schopenhauerian

22 Emphasis in the text.

23 J. Hillis Miller suggests that Hardy's views on causality may have been influenced by "Arthur Schopenhauer's *On the Four-fold Roots of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, which he read carefully in 1889 or 1890 in Mrs Karl Hillenbrand's translation", *The Linguistic Moment*, 305. For further developments on Hardy and Schopenhauer, see Laurence Estanove's remarkable doctoral thesis, *La Poésie de Thomas Hardy : une dynamique de la disillusion*—notably the whole of the Third Part (vol.2).

24 M. Millgate, *Life*, *op. cit.*, 360.

25 *Ibid.*

interpretation of a Will “irresponsible, blind but possibly growing into self-consciousness”²⁶, and a more Darwinian view of “the never-ending push of the Universe” as “an unpurposive and irresponsible groping in the direction of the least resistance”²⁷.

16. Whatever the exact definition of this force or energy driving the universe, though, its motivations remain strictly incomprehensible, and ultimately unknowable: “The Scheme of Things is, indeed, incomprehensible”, Hardy acknowledges in his private diaries; but he goes on to add that it is probably better to “[a]ssume a thousand unconscious causes”²⁸ rather than one Single Cause or Creator. For it is clear that, by invoking this impersonal Will, he is groping for a substitute to a personal God, which he has long categorically rejected—and he does own as much in the poem entitled “Fragment” (*CP* 513), when he declines the various notions of God, a Will, a Force or Laws of the universe, as more or less synonymous: “‘O we are waiting for one called God,’ said they, / ‘(Though by some the Will, or Force, or Laws; / And vaguely, by some, the Ultimate Cause)’”. There is, nonetheless, much hesitation as to the nature of this “Will”, of which men at times seem to partake: “Part is mine of the general Will” says a speaker who “Wonders About Himself” (such is the title of the poem, *CP* 510) and who cannot understand why, on this basis, his desires cannot be fulfilled. But it often seems that the idea of strictly impersonal and illogical forces behind the universe cannot quite be sustained: the temptation to anthropomorphise these forces and endow them with feelings, remains constantly present. Thus a couple on their honeymoon becomes the object for a new, modern version of mediaeval psychomachiae, with “the Spirits Ironic” and the “Spirits of Pity” battling for their souls (*CP* 515), in a confrontation that recalls the great abstract forces ruling over *The Dynasts*, Hardy’s epic drama. The irony is that Hardy’s Cosmic Will, when thus personified, then goes back to the vision of a supreme agent deciding for, and literally writing down men’s fates—which hardly amounts to any liberation from the age-old notion of a vengeful God... “The Masked Face” (*CP* 521) offers a striking parable, meant to illustrate this all-powerful yet utterly incomprehensible power ruling men’s lives. In this poem, it is the very pen tracing the fatal words, which complains that these are beyond its understanding or knowledge (or “ken”):

There once complained a goosequill pen

To the Scribe of the Infinite

Of the words it had to write

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 363

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 440-441.

Because they were past its ken.

17. The poem “The Blow” (CP 478) entirely gravitates around this absurdly arbitrary force driving men’s lives. The title of the poem is, in truth, slightly misleading, for the nature of that “blow” that has ruined two lives remains unknown, while the whole meditation bears on the lack of motivation for that blow, its gratuitousness: “the Inscrutable, the Hid / Was cause alone”. In the end, the only consolation is to be found in the thought that this blind fate is nevertheless preferable to personal attacks or purposeful evil:

Time’s finger should have stretched to show

No aimful author’s was the blow

That swept us prone,

But the Immanent Doer’s That Does Not Know

18. There is something highly self-contradictory in this notion of a “Will” ignorant of any motivation or causality, since the very term “Will” seems to presuppose some force of decision, be it conscious or not. And the same type of paradox is to be found in the “unconscienced trick of Time”, a near-oxymoron which strangely conjoins the notion of cunning with that of unconsciousness (“The Pedestrian”, CP 502). These recurrent paradoxes only show Hardy’s difficulty to come to terms with the riddle of the universe and the enigma of life.

19. When time is no longer a teleological process, nor even an ordered sequence of events, but may either repeat itself or suddenly branch out in unexpected directions, ignoring or mocking men’s decisions or desires, then life becomes nothing more than a series of disconnected *moments*, ruled by mere “chance of circumstance” (CP 441). At the end of his career, Hardy’s prefaces and postfaces grew more and more explicit in defence of the dissonant tonality of his work, made up essentially of disjointed, often contradictory *moments*. After the stormy reception of *Jude the Obscure*, it became Hardy’s obsessive line of defence that “a novel [was] an impression, not an argument”, and that his works merely recorded a “series of seemings, or personal impressions, the question of their consistency or their discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness, being regarded as not of the first moment”²⁹. A decade later, Hardy repeated in the General Preface to the 1912 Wessex Edition of the novels that “Positive views on the Whence and the Wherefore of things have never been advanced by this pen as a consistent philosophy [...] [T]he sentiments in the

29 T. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, Preface to the First Edition, August 1895, 39-40.

following pages have been stated to be mere *impressions of the moment*, and not convictions or arguments”³⁰. And the Preface to his *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, the volume of poems which followed *Moments of Vision* in 1922, again concluded on the poet’s “obstinate questionings” and “blank misgivings” (CP 557).

20. In *Moments of Vision*, this poignant awareness of the constraining yet wayward nature of fate takes a particular form, which we might regard as the major structural principle in the volume: that of a place revisited—or simply remembered—, where the poet is suddenly struck by the difference between some past scene and the present moment of meditation and reinterpretation. Once again the linear course of history splits into a series of distinct moments that seem to superimpose in memory, in order to show how “the facile moment flies” (CP 428), but also to point the gap between the poet’s youthful innocence, his mistaken expectations, and his mature knowledge or disillusioned wisdom³¹. In that sense, the perception of the significant moment, first mistaken then corrected, becomes a hermeneutic process.
21. The volume opens with a characteristic sequence of three poems, the first one of which bears the same title as the whole volume, “Moments of Vision” (CP 427). It opens the whole cycle with a forceful series of questions on the obscure immanent power which remains impenetrable yet seems to see through men, in a complex play of surfaces and mirrors: “Who holds that mirror”?, “Who lifts the mirror”?” the poet asks. The second poem, “The Voice of Things” (CP 427), introduces the characteristic pattern of “The Revisitation”, to quote the title of the poem which opened the earlier volume *Time’s Laughinstocks* (CP 191). This pattern works on the principle of repetition-cum-variation: past moments are recalled and immediately reassessed from the speaker’s present point of view, in order to follow the loss of his ideals and his slow process of disillusionment. In “The Voice of Things”, the poet is standing again on a beach where the waves, once joyful, started to laugh at him on his second visit twenty years on—a sure reminder of the voice of Ironic Fate—and now appear to “supplicate”.

Forty Augusts—aye, and several more—ago,

When I paced the headlands loosed from dull employ,

30 T. Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, 398.

31 On this constant movement of comparison between past and present moments, see L. Estanove, *op. cit.*, “‘Then and Now’: l’avant et l’après”, 129-135.

The waves huzza'd like a multitude below

In the sway of an all-including joy

Without cloy.

Blankly I walked there a double decade after,

When thwarts had flung their toils in front of me,

And I heard the waters wagging a long ironic laughter

At the lot of men, and all the vapoury

Things that be.

Wheeling change has set me again standing where

Once I heard the waves huzza at Lammas-tide;

But they supplicate now—like a congregation there

Who murmur the Confession—I outside,

Prayer denied.

22. Since Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", the image of ebbing waves has been closely associated with the anguished question of those invisible, unseizable "things" or powers "that be"; and, quite significantly, the feeling of isolation and disenchantment in Hardy's poem leads to something like a loss of faith in the perfect order of the universe, with the poet finally alienated from the community of believers, like the speaker in Arnold's elegiac meditation. Yet Hardy's following poem in the volume, "Why be at Pains" (*CP* 428), restores some sense of peace, with the poet's acceptance of his powerlessness and ignorance of life's logic. Opening on the question "Why be at pains", it hinges on the notion of "uncertainty" which closes the first stanza, to finally come to a morality made up of puzzlement and resignation at the end of the second and final stanza: "I plough the unknown".

23. After this first sequence, many of the poems are based on this "return of the native"—that is,

of the poet—to a place that was once highly significant for him, and truly works as a “*lieu de mémoire*”, a memorial place. The “visit” or movement through physical space, becomes a pilgrimage in time, as in “He Revisits his Old School” (CP 511). Often, the title of the poem bears the mention of the particular spot which brings back the memory of a past moment. In “At a Wicket-Gate” (CP 430), the narrator recalls the precise moment when he definitely parted from his lover, because of the opposition of her father. The movement of recollection is not one of expansion, but on the contrary is limited to just one short-lived moment, a tragic instant, only remembered as an ending, as a “never-more”: “Never will Fates colder-featured / Hold sway there again”.

24. The more precise the spot, the more intense the recollection, it seems: a foot-note to the poem “At a Middle-Field Gate in February” (CP 480) identifies it as taking place in “Bockhampton Lane”, close to Hardy’s native place in Higher Bockhampton. The movement of the poem carries us from the present scene of mist and rain carefully explored along the first two stanzas (“The bars are thick with drops that show [...] / They load the leafless hedge hard by [...]”) to a wholly contrasting vision—its photographic negative, as it were—introduced by an exclamation that fully renders the speaker’s surprise at the sudden rush of memories in the last stanza: “How dry it was on a far-back day [...] / When amid the sheaves in amorous play / In curtained bonnets and light array / Bloomed a bevy now underground!”. With the abrupt irruption of death in the last three words, this piece offers a good example of those poems which seem “to stop rather than end” according to Dennis Taylor’s perceptive remark³². The moment of recollection only revives the past in order to show its absolute closure and the impossibility of recapturing treasured instants.

25. Even the cyclical movement of seasons comes to reinforce the sad awareness of the irreparable past-ness of the past. The poem “Joys of Memory” (CP 437) is based on the circular repetition of the apparently joyful line, bouncing on its initial anapaest, “When the spring comes round”. The line comes back as a refrain, which forms the first and last lines as well as the pivot of the poem. But this suggestion of an eternal return of seasons is contradicted by the typical dual structure opposing “then” and “now”³³. The hope expressed in stanza one of “begin[ning] again, as if it were new / A day of like date I once lived through / [...] Old hours re-greeting” is smashed by a growing sense of finality, as the poet understands that he “house[s] with dust” and that “things that were” are

32 D. Taylor, “Hardy and Wordsworth”, 449.

33 L. Estanove, *op. cit.*, 130: “Le rapprochement de ces deux moments permet tout d’abord de souligner avec force leurs qualités fondamentalement antithétiques, et c’est par le recours très élémentaire à des structures binaires que Hardy insiste sur cette opposition”.

“past repeating”. Far from “re-greeting” past moments, the poet can only be “regretting” them—and this pun may not be the only one in the poem, since the reader realizes in the end that the “Joys of Memory” in the title may have been meant as an antiphrasis...

26. This simple but effective binary structure is also that of “The Ageing House” (CP 491), a short poem limited to two stanzas of dimeters and trimeters. The contrast between the past appearance of the house and its present decayed image is not only due to the central “But” opposing the two stanzas, and to the shift from the past tense to the present, but above all to the break in rhythm brought by the longer six-foot refrain, and the slight changes imperceptibly brought to it: “While blithely spoke the wind to the little sycamore tree” is soon re-written as “While fiercely girds the wind at the long-limbed sycamore tree!”—a line lengthened by the play on the various qualities of /i/ and /i:/ sounds. Thus the “moment” is never an arrested instant, a parenthesis in time or a self-sufficient episode. It is rather defined as a sudden intensity of perception or realization, which cuts across the linear time of chronology into the depths of personal life or family history. Time folds back upon itself in a thick palimpsest of experience: the past moment is reassessed in hindsight, while the present feeling is also enlightened, and often inflected, by past perceptions. And as happens when deciphering a palimpsest, sight becomes slightly blurred, when the movement of perception attempts in vain to fuse two actually distinct images, as the speaker notices in front of the ageing house: “And slow effacement / Is rife throughout”. Rather than a precise image, it is well and truly a momentary “vision” which the poem both offers and subtracts.

27. But this stratification of moments may even look towards a possible future, as in “An Anniversary” (CP 470), a poem similarly based on a binary structure. Stanza one strives to convince the reader that the present moment faithfully repeats a past scene when “at a like minute” the speaker found himself on the “same path”, near “the same stile”, beyond “the same green hillock” and below “the same horizon”. Again, the travel in time is a pilgrimage through space: “the same man pilgrims now hereby who pilgrimed here that day”. But the speaker violently brushes off these first mistaken impressions—“Let so much be said of the date-day’s sameness”—to then go on with a long list of the changes in the landscape: “But the tree [...] Stoops like a pedlar afflicted with lameness”, etc. Not only Nature, but the visitor too has changed and, like the house he is gazing at, his face bears the signs of age and of his coming death: below his eyes, sunk in their socket-bones, it is the skull that is already visible...

28. This dual “pattern”—to take up Dennis Taylor’s fertile concept—in which physical space

suddenly revives a whole flow of memories, cannot fail to recall the logic of Wordsworth's "spots of time". For all his angry denunciations of the great poet who praised the "Holy Plan" of Nature, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy seems to have been an assiduous reader of Wordsworth. In his reconstruction of Hardy's Library at Max Gate—his house in the suburbs of Dorchester—, Michael Millgate has listed at least six different volumes of Wordsworth's poetic and prose works, some in selections only, but most of them more or less heavily marked and annotated. Rather tellingly, Hardy's reading and annotations seems to have concentrated more precisely on the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, which was often seen as the poetic "manifesto" of Romanticism³⁴. The filiation, though denied by Hardy himself, is as indisputable as it is complex³⁵.

29. Indeed, the first lines of "The Voice of Things", quoted above, are strikingly close to those of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"—or to quote the full title of the poem, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour—July 13, 1798"³⁶. Hardy so perfectly espouses the pattern of a place revisited that his time notations at the beginning of "The Voice of Things" only seem to reproduce Wordsworth's persistent recall of the "five years that have passed" since his last visit; and in both cases the passing of years is figured by flowing waters. In Wordsworth's version,

Five years have past; five summers, with the length

Of five long winters! and again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

With a soft inland murmur.

In Hardy's,

Forty Augusts—aye, and several more—ago,

When I paced the headlands loosed from dull employ,

The waves huzza'd like a multitude below

In the sway of an all-including joy

34 Michael Millgate, "Thomas Hardy's Library at Max Gate: Catalogue of an Attempted Reconstruction", <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/hardy/hardycataz.html>

35 D. Taylor, "Hardy and Wordsworth", 443 : "What is difficult to determine precisely is how Hardy complements or refutes Wordsworth".

36 W. Wordsworth, and S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 156.

Without cloy.

30. Yet the global suggestions of the two scenes are as opposed as can be: whereas Wordsworth draws from the scenery of his “boyish” “pleasures” (l. 75) a feeling of “tranquil restoration” (l. 31), and a sense of the unity of the self, Hardy on the contrary focuses on effacement, loss, age and death, as seen in the poems already quoted. Wordsworth’s return to Tintern Abbey is truly a moment of epiphany, when the poet suddenly feels

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
[...] A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.³⁷

31. It would be easy to play on words to say that Hardy rewrites this Wordsworthian sense of “presence” as pure *absence*—and the mind as blank. “The Man who Forgot” (CP 535) stages the same innocent boy as Wordsworth’s poem: “A trotting boy passed up the way / And roused me from my thought; / and showed where lay / A spot I shyly sought”. But this time the boy will lead to no “tranquil restoration”, far from it: his lightness of heart and indifference almost amount to cruelty, when he tells the old man that the native house he sought “grew rotten” and “was pulled down” many years ago; so that no one ever gives it a thought any more: it “is almost forgotten!”. The present moment will forever be separated from the past scene by the abyss of forgetting... and memory, as in the first poem we quoted (“Heredity”, CP 434), can only “[leap] from place to place / over oblivion”. The poem “He Revisits his Old School” (CP 511) recounts the same bitter experience of displacement and disconnection, as the old man in the scene finds himself cruelly at odds with the young careless pupils. From line one, the tone is not of recovery but rather of burning regret, as suggested by the muffled /o/ sounds: “I should not have shown in the flesh, / I should have gone as a ghost”.

32. This last word is by no means accidental in Hardy’s “revisitations”. Instead of “reviving” the “picture of the mind”, as did the site of Tintern Abbey, Hardy’s spots of time are often peopled with

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159, ll. 96-103.

ghosts or shadowy images of the poet's or the visitor's former selves. They become "haunts" in the double sense of places once familiar, but now filled with spectral presences, and invaded by the sense of absence and non-correspondence between "then" and "now". The visitor seems to dissolve behind his past image, to abstract himself into a mere shadow: "there sits his shade / in its olden haunt" the schoolboys marvel at the old man who comes back to his old school. "Old Excursions" (CP 520)—a title which cannot ignore the Wordsworthian hypotext—makes this sense of irrecoverable and un-communicable memories even more painful, as the scene recalls the departure of the beloved. It presentifies absence.

'What's the good of going to Ridgeway,

Cerne or Sydling Mill [...]

As we used to do?

She will no more climb up there,

Or be visible anywhere

In those haunts we knew.'

33. Whatever happened to the beloved—she may have died, but she may also have left or betrayed the feelings of the speaker, in which case the split is even more hurtful—the comparison between the present empty scene and the past moment of happiness only serves to underline the gap between the two, and the irrevocable loss of love. It is this understanding of loss which is dramatised in "The Figure in the Scene" (CP 476) and "Why did I Sketch" (CP 477), two poems which seem to be meant as companion pieces, as hinted by the second line of the latter poem, an explicit quotation from the former:

Why did I sketch an upland green

And put the figure in

Of one on the spot with me?—

For now that one has ceased to be seen

The picture waxes akin

To a wordless irony.³⁸

38 My emphasis.

34. In both poems, everything in the landscape and the drawing—or sketch—recalls the presence of the beloved, which goes on haunting the place as “the Genius still of the spot, / Immutable, yea, / Though the place now knows her no more and has known her not / Ever since that day” (“The Figure in the Scene”, *CP* 476). In spite of the presence of death and the radical cut between the two moments, however, the poems are far from loving elegies, for what the speaker bitterly laments in the second poem is actually the *continued* presence of the figure in his sketch, and therefore his incapacity to *forget* the happy instants which life later denied him. Such is the irony of fate that those painful reminders keep imposing themselves upon one’s consciousness independent of one’s will. Through the layers of time deposited in memory or consciousness, past moments keep coming back within the present scene, or show in filigree and haunt us. And it is precisely this capacity of remanence of the moment which the poet would rather eradicate. The backward look only convinces him of his mistaken youthful innocence: he had far better have refrained from drawing the portrait of the beloved, knowing how short-lived passion is...

35. In many poems, that “fond, sad, retrospective sight” (*CP* 478) calls attention upon the “jarring discord”, the “fatal divergence”³⁹ between past and present moments, that is, between the past and the present selves of the poet or speaker. In hindsight, the mature man understands his past mistakes, his misapprehensions, his illusions, his blindness, and a host of lost opportunities. But this “belated realization”⁴⁰ or “retroactive meaning”⁴¹ brings him neither peace nor wisdom, only regret. To Susan M. Miller, “the wisdom won through retrospection is less a gift than a torment”⁴². It does not close the gap between now and then, between the speaker’s warring selves. The critics have often underlined Hardy’s expert use of “double perspective”⁴³, or diverging perspectives, which show at one and the same moment, either what was and no longer is, as in “The Figure in the Scene” and “Why did I Sketch”; or what the poet failed to see and nevertheless was bound to happen. Many of the poems are thus written on the “if-only-I-had-known”, or “little-did-I-know” mode. One of the poems’ tragic lovers for instance perceives retrospectively that the shade cast onto his beloved was to be read as a sign, an ill-omen: “Little saw we in it / But this much I know, / Of lookers on that shade, / Her to whom it made / Sooner had to go” (“In the Garden”, *CP* 531). To

39 D. Taylor, “Hardy and Wordsworth”, 445.

40 D. Taylor, “The Patterns in Hardy’s Poetry”, 264.

41 T. D. Armstrong, “Supplementarity: Poetry as the Afterlife of Thomas Hardy”. *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), 387: “Typically, memory discovers in the past a pattern of repetitions that only becomes meaningful when it is too late. The pattern is constituted by memory”, and “the moment of belated understanding inevitably linked to a history of misunderstanding”.

42 Miller, Susan M., “Thomas Hardy and the Impersonal Lyric”, 98: “[T]he wisdom won through retrospection is less a gift than a torment”.

43 *Ibid.*

Susan Miller, “Hardy’s critique of intense momentary insight [...] reveals a sensibility tortured by the awareness that lived experience is always discredited by the changes that will come”⁴⁴. The whole of the poem “The Musical Box” (CP 482) is contained within the loop suggested by the return of the phrase “I did not hear / I did not see”. But the conclusion rewords this into “Lifelong to be / I thought it [...] I did not hear in my dull soul-swoon – I did not see”. Finally, in “The Chimes” (CP 475), the poet confesses that “[he] learned to see / That bale may spring where blisses are”. Interestingly, the title of this poem may itself chime in with Joseph Hillis Miller’s remark on the discordant quality or “dissonant chiming”⁴⁵ characteristic of Hardy’s visions.

36. More clearly than in Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth’s concept of the “Spots of time” is explicitly defined in the autobiographical monument *The Prelude*⁴⁶.

There are in our existence spots of time,
 That with distinct pre-eminence retain
 A renovating virtue, whence—depressed
 By false opinion and contentious thought,
 Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
 In trivial occupations, and the round
 Of ordinary intercourse—our minds
 Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
 A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
 That penetrates, enables us to mount,
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
 This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
 Among those passages of life that give

44 *Ibid.*, 111.

45 J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment.*, 284.

46 W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book 12, ll. 208-225, in H. Bloom, and L. Trilling, eds, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, 223.

Deepest knowledge to what point, and how,
 The mind is lord and master—outward sense
 The obedient servant of her will. Such moments
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
 From our first childhood.

37. Hardy's "spots of time" may seem very Wordsworthian at first sight. Like Wordsworth's sudden illuminations, they too spring back naturally when physical space re-awakens vivid memories. In both poets, the exploration of time takes the form of a digging through the layers of experience, when the poet attempts to decipher life as a palimpsest of intense moments. But the comparison stops here, for Hardy's remembered scenes have nothing of the "renovating", "nourishing", "entrancing virtue" of these recaptured moments in Wordsworth. Instead, they point the unbridgeable gap between what was and what might have been, between the happy past and the disillusioned present. As Dennis Taylor has demonstrated, "Hardy was extremely responsive to Wordsworth and extremely critical of him"; his Wordsworthianism, Taylor goes on to say, is a "modified" one⁴⁷. One that sees the fragmentation, rather than the plenitude, of experience, the incoherence of time and fate, and the omnipresence of loss.

The Wordsworthian hope [...] is that these memorial conclusions refind the past in the present, and achieve an eternal spot of time in the here and now. There is a single-mindedness about Hardy refusing this finessing of the past into the present. For Hardy, memory remains a dissociating phenomenon, a sign of the mind torn between what it once was and what it has become.⁴⁸

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47 D. Taylor, "Hardy and Wordsworth".

48 *Ibid.*, 447.

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