

The Poems of Thomas Hardy

by Peter Cash



English Association Bookmarks
No.

The Poems of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

It is in the contemplation of death that the necessity for human attitudes to become self-supporting in the face of an indifferent universe is most poignantly felt. Only the greatest tragic poets have achieved an equally self-reliant and immitigable acceptance.

I. A. Richards

Hardy is now seen to be truly a Victorian – a Victorian in his very pessimism which implies positives and assurances that have vanished. He inhabits a solid world, with the earth firm under his feet. He knows what he wants, what he values and who he is [but this] solidity appears archaic.

F. R. Leavis

Thus speak the fathers of Practical Criticism on the subject of Thomas Hardy's poetry. As we may read, one of them (Richards) has powerful thematic reasons for believing that Hardy must be included among our "greatest tragic poets"; meanwhile, the other (Leavis) searches about himself for formal, stylistic and thematic reasons to exclude this poet from his 'great tradition' of English writers. Richards contends that "the greatest tragic poets" express by definition an "immitigable acceptance" of two eternal truths: first, that man is a finite creature in an infinite universe which remains by its nature indifferent to his consequent suffering; second, that, since man is moving inexorably through time towards death, human existence is potentially, if not intrinsically melancholy/miserable. By contrast, Leavis (roughly speaking)

argues that Hardy, in grappling with these twin peaks of realisation, has nothing new to say and – what's even worse from Leavis' point of view – no new ways of saying it. Reputedly, Hardy wrote to Robert Graves (*Goodbye to All That*, 1929) that his ambitions were modest: "All we can do is to write on the old themes in the old styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us." Without further investigation, Leavis is convinced:

Hardy is a naive poet of simple attitudes and outlook there was little in his technique that could be taken up by younger poets and developed in the solution of their own problems.

In Leavis' estimation, Hardy as a poet is still that "Victorian" novelist, "solid" author of *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Woodlanders* (1887). He is certainly not a star by which we may take new bearings in English poetry.

So who's right? In my opinion, it is not Leavis – who is in any case concerned to clear the ground so that he can raise upon it a shrine to that old possum T. S. Eliot and his synthetic poetry of the 1920s. In defence of Hardy and in response to the faint praises with which Leavis seeks to damn him, we may want to ask: a) what in human terms could be more important than arriving at a self-supporting attitude in the face of death? and b) what could ever be complex about achieving it? The surprise of this defence is that the answer to the second question is not rhetorical:

Hardy's greatness lies in the integrity with which he accepted the conclusion, enforced, he believed, by science, that nature is indifferent to human values.

The answer (which Leavis himself gives) is that Hardy's "integrity" – "solid" and "archaic" though it is – is a matter of some complexity. It is indeed a matter of technique: that is, of his forms and his style.

NOTES

The key to Hardy's verse is authenticity. He was seized by a particular impulse – an immediate or recollected emotion combined with a particular rhythm – and would override ordinary proprieties of speech in his intense concern for faithfulness to it.

P. N. Furbank

Many critics of Hardy's poetry have found themselves in the uncomfortable and ultimately preposterous position of applauding him for his clumsiness.

Donald Davie

Furbank's conception of the lyric [= a poem that faithfully charts the rhythm of a personal experience] explains Hardy's technical genius to us; it sets out succinctly what such a poem ought to be, but (cf. Christina Rossetti and A. E. Housman) rarely is. His relentless pursuit of organic forms [= forms within which a particular impulse can be accurately, if not always comfortably accommodated] leads this poet not up blind alleys, but into fertile areas where his stylistic imagination can grow to embody the troublesome impulse.

NEUTRAL TONES (1867)

No early poem better illustrates this process of composition than **Neutral Tones** (1867). Quatrains of Hardy's own devising confer a traditional emphasis on a traditional theme: namely, the end of an affair. Hardy's sweetheart keeps an appointment with him only then to end their relationship:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

The perception which informs this poem is that the natural world is unsympathetic to the poet's unhappiness at being rejected; it is for this reason that the 'tones' of the landscape, against which the parting takes place, are 'neutral'; he indents the fourth line in order to draw attention to the 'gray' ash-leaves by which he proposes to make his pessimistic point. For the lovelorn poet, this parting is not such a sweet sorrow.

Hardy associates his feelings of rejection with the details of his immediate surroundings; his sorrow at losing his loved one takes on the colours of the sky ('white') and the ash-leaves ('gray'). Through life, he takes with him two memories of this bitter experience: first, he remembers her face with its cold, playful eyes ('tedious riddles') and its moribund smile ('dearest thing'); second, he remembers the colourlessness of the landscape which mirrors her dissipated enthusiasm for their relationship. The fourth/final quatrain –

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves

– begins with an adverbial phrase ('since then') which tells us that the poet has been engaged in painful retrospection. Hardy has looked back at the event recorded in the first three quatrains and come to the conclusion that it taught him a 'keen lesson': namely, that 'love deceives'. An alternative title for this lyric might be 'Sombre Tones', for he reaches a sombre conclusion, not that individual lovers are necessarily deceivers, but that love itself is deceptive: that is, it promises more than it can deliver, offers much only to disappoint.

Every subsequent time that he has suffered romantic rejection, Hardy cannot help but recall the unsympathetic shades of that autumn day. The pictorial images ('face', 'sun', 'pond', 'tree', 'leaves') have acquired a mnemonic force. They have become powerful agents of the feeling that human emotions are out of place in a non-human universe which, if not actively unsympathetic, is nevertheless "indifferent" [= 'neutral'] to them. Hardy, then, is ultimately concerned to paint a canvas on which the 'tones' are 'neutral': that is, they reflect the 'grayish' indifference of the non-human landscape to the plight of the human lover.

Thomas Hardy wrote 947 poems. Dating them is not a matter of any simplicity: although the poems published separately in periodicals were collected into book-form, these books appeared at intervals of years – 1901, 1909, 1913, 1917, 1922, 1925 – and rarely give a precise indication of the chronology: indeed, the very title of Hardy's 1922 volume **Late Lyrics and Earlier** points to the problem. Furthermore, poems were continually revised so that many were 'completed' only after they had first been published! In this Bookmark, poems are dated where possible, but also lined up to illustrate common themes.

A BROKEN APPOINTMENT

F. R. Leavis observes that Hardy's poems "start immediately out of his own remembered past and are particular evocations of utter loss, the blindness of chance, the poignancy of love and its helplessness and the cruelty of time." **A Broken Appointment** conforms to this description, for the remembered moment from Hardy's past out of which this poem starts is an occasion on which 'a woman' whom he loved broke an appointment with him: in modern

parlance, she stood him up. Rumour associates this poem with Mrs Florence Henniker (1855-1923) whom Hardy met in 1893 when she was 38 years old and for whom he conceived an immediate admiration.

Even so, **A Broken Appointment** is not an “evocation of utter loss”; nor does it capture “the poignancy of love” nor – even though ‘marching Time drew on’ – does it meditate upon “the cruelty of time”. To be precise, Hardy’s poem reflects upon the extent to which common courtesies/good manners are expressions of the supreme quality in his moral universe: ‘that high compassion’ for which he specifically coins the compound-noun ‘lovingkindness’.

In **Neutral Tones**, the setting was a pond by which a woman was telling the young Hardy that she no longer wishes to see him. In **A Broken Appointment**, the situation is identical except in one important respect: in this poem, the woman does not show up. The situation for the poem is that ‘a woman’ does not appear in person to tell him to his face that their affair/relationship is at an end. Hardy examines his feeling of numbness: significantly, he is ‘numb’ not because he has missed her ‘dear presence there’, but because – from her failure to turn up – he has learned something worse: namely, that ‘pure lovingkindness’ was ‘lacking’ from the make-up of her moral character. When she failed to keep her appointment, it was not so much for the end of their romance as for this exposed weakness in her moral ‘make’ [= her lack of humanity] that he ‘grieved’.

The elaborate stanza-structure is functional in the expression of Hardy’s complex feeling. In the first line of the first stanza, his four monosyllables (‘You did not come’) solemnly accept the end of the affair; by the last line of the stanza, he is not so much solemn as incredulous that she ‘did not come’: that she lacked the common human decency to put in an appearance. Although the eighth line consists of the same four words, it is not a *repeated* line because its tone has undergone a subtle modulation; his accents of incredulity [at her lack of moral courage, her graceless conduct] have transformed it.

The structure of the second stanza is a duplicate: what is more, it registers a change of feeling by the very same means. In the first line of the second stanza, Hardy’s four monosyllables (‘You love not me’) come squarely to terms with the fact that he has loved and lost; bravely, he admits that he ‘knew it’. But he then embarks upon a sane reflection which relies for its effect upon the moral importance of etiquette. Over five-and-a-half lines, he expands a rhetorical question: what kind of world is it if we show ‘loyalty’ only to those whom we ‘love’? what kind of a person is she who reserves ‘lovingkindness’ only for those whom she wants? **Pure** lovingkindness’ [= that which lacks self-interest] involves no such discriminations; it is polite enough to show consideration for others on principle. At the opposite extreme, Hardy’s absent sweetheart shows no respect for his feelings; in her view, they are not ‘worth’ any sympathy.

Informing his question is Hardy’s profound belief that there is a ‘store of human deeds divine in all but name’ to which this ordinary woman (‘a woman’) has passed up the chance to ‘add’ one more; in Hardy’s imagination, there seems somewhere to exist a sum of good deeds to which we are all free to ‘add’ whenever an opportunity presents itself. Why could she not find it within herself to do such a good deed?

Lacking such an imagination, this woman could not spare him even ‘a little hour’; without an ethical dimension to her thinking, she has been cowardly and mean. Seeing how ‘time-torn’ he is, wouldn’t it have been an act of ‘human’ generosity [= ‘love’ in another sense] to keep the appointment and ‘soothe’ him with an explanation? Couldn’t she have ‘come’ out of the goodness of her heart? Wouldn’t such a ‘pure’ gesture have been all the more valuable (all but ‘divine’) precisely because – as the repeated words insist, but in a changed tone – she does not love him? In short, **A Broken Appointment** is a call for magnanimity in personal relationships. Although there is no date for this poem, we do know that **The Division** – with its cryptic reference to ‘that thwart thing’ between two lovers – is from 1893.

TO LIZBIE BROWNE

To Lizbie Browne tells the tale of a lost love. The speaker of the poem is an unrequited lover [= Hardy aged sixteen] who is addressing the first object of his affections, an older girl by the traditional name of Elizabeth Browne whom he lost under equally traditional circumstances: namely, his failure to gather her rosebud while he may. At the same time, **To Lizbie Browne** belongs to another tradition of poems, those which ask, *Ubi sunt?* In this case, Hardy is asking the question: where is Lizbie Browne now? He is wondering what became of her.

From the first three sestet, it is clear that Lizbie Browne (actually, the daughter of a gamekeeper) was the first female to make a lasting impression upon the poet; she was the first girl to catch his eye/to awaken his sexuality. In particular, her 'arch' look and her 'bay-red' hair captivated him. It is in the fourth sestet that the poet/the speaker (Hardy himself) admits to never having declared his attraction to her; he confesses that he admired her only at a distance/by stealth. While the poet was busy casting longing looks in her direction, another man — a bolder lover — came along and seized the day: more precisely, he seized Lizbie Browne and made her his wife. Following this dramatic development, Lizbie Browne, married to 'the best of men', went out of the poet's life never to be seen again: 'where went you then?' He laments her disappearance from his life.

During the last three sestet, Hardy draws a rushed conclusion from his experience. He should have realised that 'girls ripen fast'; he regrets that he failed to realise at the time that Lizbie Browne had become sexually available/nubile. He is reflecting on his own naiveté; he was hesitant because he thought that she would be as bashful as he was. From this bitter experience, he has learned a lesson: not to be so backward in coming forward. He has been left to bemoan a wasted opportunity, to curse himself for being so timid. Even worse, he realises that, if — in future — his name were to be mentioned in her hearing, the love of his life would not recognise it, for he will have faded into complete anonymity: "And who was he?" In the end, he sees himself ruefully for the complete non-entity that he then was.

I LOOK INTO MY GLASS

In this poem, Hardy studies the effects of time upon human identity: in particular, he highlights the tension between looking ('my wasting skin') and feeling ('throbbings of noontide'). The situation for the poem is a 'look' into a mirror which the poet takes; it alarms him with the stark realisation that he has grown physically old. But the sentiment in this poem is complex, for Hardy — a man in his fifties — is not simply regretting the fact that his skin is wrinkled; he is explaining that he could tolerate his physical decline 'with equanimity' [= calm] if only he did not still feel emotionally robust. If his 'heart' had aged at the same rate as his 'skin', then he could await his 'endless rest' [= a metonym for death] without particular anguish. As things are, he has to endure an unresolved conflict between his physical frailty ('fragile frame') and his emotional vigour ('throbbings').

The metaphor which controls this poem is the contrast between 'eve' and 'noontide': between the poet's decline into old age and his contradictory feeling that he is still in the prime of his life. Although he is in the evening of his life, Hardy's heart still throbs with a young man's passion. Emotionally, psychologically, he feels as if he is still at his peak; but he is honest enough to admit that he no longer has the physical capacity to act on his feelings: in other words, his physical appearance conditions his attitude towards himself, modifies his sense of personal identity. In this lyric, Hardy is struggling to reconcile the sprightly way he feels with the decrepit way he looks. He concludes that, if only he felt as old as he looks, then he would not be so troubled.

DRUMMER HODGE (25th November, 1899)

In Hardy's imagination, it makes sense to believe that buried bodies can be reborn and re-grown out of the earth in which they have been interred: put another way, that corpse-matter, by decomposing underground, can reincarnate itself above ground in the flowers and the trees which it fertilises. He first gives expression to this idea in 'The Dead Drummer', subsequently re-titled **Drummer Hodge**.

The not-entirely-fictional character of Drummer Hodge is a Dorchester boy reported killed in the Boer War of 1899-1902. Imagining his death, empathising with him, Hardy finds it difficult to accept that the boy's body will have been thrown 'uncoffined' into 'foreign' soil under 'foreign constellations'; this is because he believes that the dead drummer will be reincarnated as an integral part of the South African landscape in which he has been buried. Hardy believes that, because he was 'uncoffined', the little drummer boy will undergo a radical transformation: that is, be reconstituted – by a process of transubstantiation – out of the terrain in which he has been laid to 'rest'.

It is a fanciful version of this idea that informs Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* (1915) in which the speaker assures his bereaved family that, if he 'should die', then there will always be 'some corner of a foreign field/That is forever England'. Hardy, however, does not share Brooke's cheery emphasis; he does not feel that Drummer Hodge will in this gruesome way begin to colonise the South African 'veldt'. In Hardy's view, the process of transubstantiation means that the little drummer boy will be left to decompose in a corner of the universe implacably and 'eternally' indifferent to him.

What his re-growth will mean is that 'Young Hodge' (from the 'Northern' hemisphere) will live in reincarnated form in the 'Southern' hemisphere: that is, become an actual 'portion' of 'some Southern Tree'. In Hardy's view, Hodge has suffered a tragic alienation because he will become chemically/geologically integrated into an 'unknown plain' ('the broad Karoo') far away from the Dorset landscape ('Wessex') to which he belongs/is acclimatised. Instead of being reborn in familiar surroundings, 'Hodge the Drummer' – an English country bumpkin – will 'forever be' part of a remote 'land' overlooked by 'strange-eyed constellations'. The Boer War fires Hardy's imagination. It gives rise to both **A Wife in London** and **The Man He Killed**, the poem of 1902 which inspires Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting* (1918).

TRANSFORMATIONS

In this later poem, Hardy imagines that 'a man' whom his grandfather knew has been buried for many years in the local churchyard, has undergone a 'transformation' and become 'a portion' of this yew'. Without recourse to metaphor, Hardy states that the dead man 'is a portion' of the yew tree; it is significant that he is using the same literal verb and the same literal noun.

In this poem, Hardy's attitude to death is positively "self-reliant" because he is reiterating that, after 'a man' has been interred, he is transformed into a fertile 'portion' of his burial mound: that he becomes a 'portion' of the soil which, by means of an organic process, a kind of transubstantiation, he proceeds to enrich. In the first stanza, Hardy reformulates the idea that, after a 'ruddy human life' has come to an end, it is 'turned to a green shoot': that is, a person who has ceased to exist in human form metamorphoses into an organic part of the surrounding landscape. From this point of view, Hardy's feeling is that the universe – at least, as it is represented by the local churchyard – is not "indifferent".

In the second stanza, Hardy continues to promote this unconventional idea. He allows for organic re-growth to the point at which he seems to be expressing an implicit belief in physical possibility of reincarnation. In the final line, it is entirely conceivable to him that,

after her death, 'the fair girl' whom he once tried to court 'may be entering this rose'; in this line, he is taking it for granted that, after bodies have been interred, they undergo 'transformations' which result in their reincarnations in various floral forms. At the start of the third/final stanza, Hardy makes a nonchalant use of 'so' in order to indicate that he is concluding a logical argument:

And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again
That made them what they were!

The punctuation exclaims at the fantastic idea that the dead have found themselves re-energised and resurrected in living forms, embraced and exhilarated once more by the elements. Literally, the exclamation-mark acknowledges the preposterous unlikelihood of this idea, but – significantly – does so at the same time as it continues to promote it.

VOICES FROM THINGS GROWING IN A CHURCHYARD (1921)

Here, Hardy, far from tiring of this idea, finds particular examples to support it. He portrays himself as visiting 'a churchyard' and literally hearing 'voices from things growing' there. He draws us into a situation where it makes imaginative sense to adopt his self-supporting attitude to death. By reference to his exemplars, Hardy argues that, after death, after physical decomposition, every person is promoted to a kind of natural glory. In the first and the fifth stanzas, he introduces us to female figures who were 'poor' in life, but who have been reincarnated in floral forms which now beautify and enrich the earth in which they lie: for example, 'poor' Fanny Hurd [= 'a little girl' of his acquaintance by the full name of Frances Hurden] has been changed into 'daisy shapes'. Following his/her death, each named character has undergone some 'feat of change' [= a transformation] and has physically returned 'anew'. The diction is familiar: beside one mound, Thomas Voss has 'entered this yew' and 'turned to clusters of ruddy view': that is, reappeared in yew-berries. In describing the regeneration of these bodies, Hardy adds the idea that death does not discriminate according to social class: from his exemplars, it is clear that this process of reincarnation is democratic. He describes the lives of both rich (Bachelor Bowring, Lady Gertrude, Squire Audeley Gray) and poor in a specific effort to demonstrate that each is transformed alike into another fragrant, verdant form.

Hardy, then, implies that he has managed to find a solution (of sorts) to the problem of human mortality. From this poem, it is evident that he believes in a posthumous form of communication between the dead in the churchyard and the living; he is asking us to believe that he can hear 'their lively speech' and he effectively appoints himself 'an interpreter' of the language in which these transformed characters are murmuring. Accordingly, his final stanza describes the 'radiant hum' of this churchyard. Hardy's conviction – that we never die, but merely metamorphose into other forms – is an extremely positive way to contemplate the prospect of death. In **Proud Songsters**, Hardy returns to the science behind this idea. He listens to the thrushes, finches and nightingales singing cheerily and reflects that only twelve months ago they were 'only particles of grain', thereby cheering himself again with the thought that existence takes a variety of physical forms.

THE DARKLING THRUSH (1900)

It was the art-critic John Ruskin who – in **Modern Painters III** (1856) – coined the term 'pathetic fallacy'; he did so in order to criticise the growing tendency of both artists and writers to ascribe human emotions to non-human phenomena. It was, so Ruskin argued, a **fallacy** to suggest (as Wordsworth and Tennyson regularly did) that human feelings could

seek and find a **sympathetic** response in their natural surroundings; such sentimentality, he explained, created "a falseness in our impressions of external things". In **The Darkling Thrush**, Hardy's aim is to test the impact of the pathetic fallacy upon his own powers of poetic perception. In this poem, he reflects upon the extent to which the **atmosphere** of his natural surroundings ('a coppice' beneath a 'canopy' of cloud) is successful in conveying his own **mood**.

The precise date on which **The Darkling Thrush** was first published is of immense significance: it appeared in *The Times* on 1st January 1900. It is an occasional poem; what is more, the occasion for which it has been written is the first day of the new century about which readers of *The Times* – prescient about neither The Great War nor the Holocaust – are very likely to be optimistic. As a result, Hardy (the novelist responsible for both **Tess** and **Jude the Obscure**) for once sets out to write something innocent, something which will not give offence. Or does he?

The setting for this poem is a Dorset landscape in the bleak mid-winter. The purpose of the first two octaves is to describe this hibernian landscape from which the sheer cold has driven 'all mankind' but the poet himself; in order to describe this 'desolate' scenery, Hardy selects a number of 'sharp features' which characterise the dark season. Foremost among these features are the cadaverous trees of the coppice: namely, the leafless trees whose skeletal outlines ('bleak twigs') show black against the sky. Given the occasion for the poem, such scenic details keep suggesting to Hardy that the century which has just ended has physically died and is 'outleant' in its 'crypt'; extending this metaphor, Hardy imagines that the mournful sound of the wind is singing a dirge (a 'death-lament') for the 'corpse' of the nineteenth century. Given this morbid background, it is no wonder that all other living souls have 'sought their household fires' and that the poet himself is 'fervourless': that is, without energy/bereft of enthusiasm for life itself. According to this reading, the torpid landscape (in which 'the ancient pulse of germ and birth/Was shrunken hard and dry') may truly be said to reflect the torpor of the poet; fallacy or not, the poet's immediate surroundings do seem here to be in sympathy with his emotions.

Into this 'bleak' environment, Hardy (by means of a dramatic synecdoche) introduces 'a voice'; it turns out to be that of an 'aged thrush' which – in spite of its frailty in the wintry 'blast' – is heroically singing its heart out ('a full-hearted evensong', no less). In this grim context, the song of the 'gaunt' thrush, a song of 'joy illimited' [= of unconfined joy] strikes an incongruous and ironic note; its dynamic intervention upon the gloomy scene ('fling') seems entirely out of place, even embarrassingly intrusive. In Hardy's poetry, a tenebrous atmosphere ('the growing gloom') is never merely literal and meteorological; it is also emotional and spiritual, reflecting a mood. Given these dismal circumstances, Hardy needs to understand why the bird is singing its head off: why is this thrush singing a 'happy goodnight air' against such a dark backdrop?

The sentimental/twee answer (for which contemporary readers of *The Times* would settle) is that the thrush is greeting the fledgling century with an un-ironic exuberance: in other words, it is in intuitive touch with 'some blessed Hope' for the future of mankind in the twentieth century of which he – a mere poet – is sadly 'unaware'. After all, Hardy's very title – 'The Darkling Thrush' [= 'the thrush in the dark'] – is an oxymoron which describes a contradictory phenomenon and suggests that the thrush may know better than to be silenced. 'Afar or nigh' around them is 'so little cause for carolings', are so few reasons for 'ecstatic sound', that Hardy 'could' start to wonder whether this 'small' bird knows something [to support its wild optimism, to make it 'ecstatic'] which he does not But no: in the end, it is the conditional verb 'could think', that vague use of 'some' and that feeble capital for 'Hope' which signal that Hardy is not questioning his own judgement and is not placing any such faith in the telepathic powers of a bird; in the last analysis, this one voice singing in the darkness does not possess a superior wisdom, but is an oddity. Ultimately, 'the darkling thrush' is a thrush in both the literal *and* the metaphorical dark: that is, it does not possess any heightened sensitivity or

supernatural foresight. Finally, it is the 'cloudy canopy' and not the ornithological 'evensong' that successfully conveys the mood of the poet. Paraphrased, the poem reads: Stupid bird!

Between the ages of 23 and 28, Hardy wrote poetry, but then – for the next twenty-five years or so – devoted himself almost exclusively to fiction. It was only after the hostile reception of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 that he returned industriously and permanently to poetry. It will be observed that most of Hardy's poems which can be dated date from 1896 and that many of them take surprising turns, bring out cruel/rich ironies. As a rule, Hardy enjoys disappointing conventional expectation, subverting traditional optimism. **The Darkling Thrush** is one poem in which he does that; two others are **Are You Digging on my Grave?** and **The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House**

Are You Digging on my Grave? is a dramatic lyric which takes the shape of a dialogue between a buried corpse and her dog. During the first three stanzas, the buried woman keeps guessing who is digging on her grave and getting the answer wrong. In the fourth stanza, her 'little dog' owns up that he is doing the digging and elicits from her an optimistic gasp of realisation: "Ah, yes!" She should have known that it would be a loyal animal – not a member of 'human kind' – who was so sad at her death that he was trying to disinter her. No, retorts the dog, that's not it: candidly and unsentimentally, he confesses that he had forgotten where her grave was and had inadvertently buried his bone there. The dog vocalises the degree to which the Wessex universe of Hardy's work is "indifferent to human values". The world which the dog describes is comfortless, accommodating human hopes simply in order to punish them.

For its effect, **The Fallow Deer** relies upon a metonym: 'one without' [= someone outside]. In the first stanza, the effect of this metonym is to disguise the identity of the figure outside the lonely house; at once, there is a suggestion that this figure 'on the sheet of glistening white' may be ghostly, existing outside earthly dimensions, thereby hinting at a life after death. The function of the second stanza is to disappoint this optimistic possibility. As Hardy's title announces, there is no supernatural somebody 'watching' over us:

Lit by lamps of rosy dyes
We do not discern those eyes
 Wondering, aglow,
 Fourfooted, tiptoe.

At the end of the second stanza, which replicates the shape of the first stanza, Hardy brings us up against the reality of the situation. Here is his "very pessimism". Because this creature is 'fourfooted', it has a substantial existence [= is not of the spirit world]. Even though it is standing on 'tiptoe', all four of its feet are firmly on the ground. Cf. Edward Thomas' poem *Out in the Dark* (24th December, 1916).

IN TENEBRIS (I)

In this poem, Hardy's aim is to voice an unconventional attitude to despair – for which in his sixth and final quatrain he coins the noun 'unhope'. In this poem, Hardy is not only 'in tenebris' [= in shades of darkness] but also *in extremis*: that is, he has reached a stage in his life at which his personal resources are depleted to the point of exhaustion. Both literally and emotionally, he depicts a scene of desolation: to be precise, he sees himself as immersed in a deep gloom in which he can no longer feel emotional pain. What is radical is that he turns this tenebrous condition to a fresh advantage.

In Tenebris is a series of six sombre reflections, each contained within a tight quatrain. Hardy's quatrain-form is a function of his emotional restraint: two trimeters that rhyme bb are compressed between two four-syllable a-rhymes, allowing no scope for self-indulgence.

Readers expect that the technical structures of a poem may be identical; what is singular about **In Tenebris** is that both its grammatical and its logical structures are identical too: in each gnomic quatrain, Hardy follows a declarative description of loss with a contrived consolation for that loss.

In the first quatrain, Hardy states that the occasion is the onset of 'wintertime': notably, this season marks the first anniversary of a death. It is characteristic of Hardy's logical strategy that he should find a way to welcome this sad anniversary. He reasons that the season 'cannot bring again' the original pain of 'bereavement' because 'twice no one dies'; consequently, he presents himself as much consoled by the reflection that this 'wintertime', though it may awaken a painful memory, 'cannot bring again' the acute 'pain' which last wintertime brought with it. On this unlikely basis, he may be imagined as greeting it.

In the second quatrain, Hardy reiterates this sentiment: that, no matter how sharp the pain of the anniversary is, it cannot be so sharp as the pain (twelve months ago) of the loss itself. With the death in question, Hardy ('Flower-petals flee') associates his symbolic recollections of petals falling from flowers: in other words, he entertains the pathetic fallacy. Once more, he consoles himself with the certainty that, 'since it once hath been', 'that severing scene' [= a late-autumn scene] will not be able to cause him the same degree of grief; his genuine consolation is that nothing fortunately will ever again be able to 'harrow' him to that extent. [In parentheses, it is worth noting that the phrase is consciously ambiguous: on a literal level, the scene is of flower-petals being severed from their stalks; on a metaphorical level, it is of the bonds being severed between a close friend and this earth on which he himself remains behind].

In the third quatrain, the backdrop is such a grim landscape that even darkling thrushes are said to 'faint in dread'; in this poem, frost which was 'spectre-gray' is now described as having a 'black length'. Once again, Hardy's logical strategy for coping with his 'black' grief is to reflect that at least this time he will not suffer the loss of 'old strength' [= emotional energy] that he suffered a year ago; whatever happens at the end of this autumn cannot further sap him of strength, for – 'strength long since fled' – he cannot lose a form of stamina which he now no longer possesses. Ingeniously, Hardy is reflecting upon an achievement.

In this poem, Hardy explores a state of emotional destitution – for which the seasonal decay ('Leaves turn to dun') is a metaphor. In the fourth quatrain, his strategy is to examine another benefit of this condition, another comfort. For dramatic effect, he writes about himself in the third person, arguing that at least this year will be different from recent years ('as of old') in that friends of his 'cannot turn cold' [that is, die] because his last friend died a year ago. It transpires, then, that the occasion for the poem is the first anniversary of the death of his last surviving friend. The true consolation for such a friendless man ('with none') is that he finds himself beyond the capacity to feel further 'bereavement-pain'.

In the fifth quatrain, Hardy describes the meteorological conditions of 'wintertime' in order to make the same point: that, although 'tempests may scath', their blasts can no longer injure a man 'who no heart hath'. He implies that, although emotional storms may rage, they will no longer rage in *his heart* because he has lost the capacity for such intensities of feeling (for 'throbbings of noontide', as he describes them in **I Look into My Glass**). For this description of an emotional numbness, the impersonal voice of the third person is entirely fitting; what we must recognise is that this numbness is being perceived as a distinct compensation.

In the sixth quatrain, Hardy presents himself as being indifferent to the black look of night. He reassures us that he will not turn pale ('appal') at the sight of Death wearing a black cloak ('cope'); after all, he has reached the stage where he is 'past doubting' that his own death is next and is waiting in a state of active resignation [= 'in unhope'] for the inevitable oblivion. To an understanding of **In Tenebris**, that neologism 'unhope' is the key; it does not mean 'without hope', but refers instead to a state of repose in which a man feels totally free from

the burden of expectation. In each quatrain, Hardy has set out to articulate attitudes which offer positive consolations to the man on whom wintertime keeps encroaching/who must live out his life under the black cope of night. Ultimately, the mood of the poem is not morose, but doggedly heroic. By his peculiar perceptions of a plus-factor, Hardy even attains a degree of 'equanimity'.

Donald Davie endorses I. A. Richards' view that "the greatest tragic poets" make their ways towards an acceptance of the fact that man dies and that the universe in which he lives is utterly indifferent to this inevitability. What is more, Davie –

Moreover, the irony of Hardy and Housman alike is in any case quite different from most modern irony; the older poets do not recommend irony as a secure or dignified stance from which to confront reality, rather it is the stance of reality as it confronts us. Their irony is cosmic, where an Auden's is provisional and strategic

– points out that they do so by means of a 'cosmic irony': that is, by describing the look on the face of the cosmos/the non-human world as it watches the human drama unfold. This is an impassive look, a 'stance' unmoved by human trials and tribulations. It is at the very end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) that Hardy refers to 'a general drama of pain'.

THE SELF-UNSEEING (1901)

The Self-Unseeing – one of the great short poems in the English language – is another reflection on the irony of the human condition. For Hardy is not only an inventive formalist in the Romantic tradition: as Davie explains, he is also a cosmic ironist in that tradition. The theme of **The Self-Unseeing** is man's failure to see himself in the midst of flux. The poem has a rueful tone because it deals with our tendency not to recognise the best days of our lives as we are actually living them. In short, it is a hymn to hindsight.

The setting for the poem is Hardy's childhood home in the Dorset village of Higher Bockhampton. The occasion for the poem is a re-visit to the site of this thatched cottage which has been demolished; he can tell where the door 'was' because the flagstone in that area has been eroded [= is 'footworn and hollowed'] by generations of wear. The contrast is between this domestic interior at a particular moment in the past and the same scene at the present moment. Hardy draws this contrast in order to realise his ironic failure to live that past moment to the full:

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in.

She sat here in her chair,
Smiling into the fire;
He who played stood there,
Bowing it higher and higher.

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away.

Hardy's adverbs – 'here', 'here', 'here' and 'there' – conduct us on a tour of the vacant rooms. Although those times are gone, they are not forgotten. He re-visualises them: in that fourth line of the first quatrain, he organises the trimeter so that the lively walking-in of 'the dead

feet' is done for them by an onomatopoeic use of the monosyllabic rhythm; in the second stanza, his mother Jemima is seated beside the fire (possibly sewing) and his father, with an increasing vivacity, is playing on his fiddle a tune to which his little son dances without a care in the world. Hardy's father (also Thomas) had died in 1892, aged 81; his mother, however, died only in 1904, aged 90.

In the third quatrain, Hardy sums up this nostalgic experience. He concentrates upon his ironic unawareness that those days in his family cottage were the best days of his life and that he therefore took their Wordsworthian 'gleam' for granted. In the fourth line of this quatrain, he neglects to stress the pronoun 'we' in order to emphasise just how typical it is of us as a race to miss such opportunities: to be 'looking away' is by no means a failing peculiar to Hardy's family, but a characteristic tendency of humankind. As Hardy confronts the empty spaces of the re-visited cottage, so the empty spaces confront him with their ironic capacity to endure in the absences of the persons who once occupied them. Why, Hardy asks himself, did he not appreciate the domestic bliss at the time? If 'everything glowed with a gleam', why didn't he notice it? In this final quatrain, he recognises that, even though man's movement through time towards death cannot be arrested, it can perhaps be contained by a cheerful resolution to make the most of those moments in which happiness is isolated. Once experienced, such vivid moments cannot – even by the hands of time – be wrenched from the poet's memory; in this sense, they are 'blessings'.

Such wisdom is responsible for the self-supporting attitude "in the face of an indifferent universe" (Richards) that Hardy achieves in the wake of his wife's death in November 1912. Following Emma's death, he manages in **The Going, The Walk, Beeny Cliff, The Voice, After A Journey** and **At Castle Boterel** to arrive by complex means at an "equally self-reliant and immitigable acceptance" of his loss. No stanza gives more explicit point to Richards' argument than the final stanza of **The Going**:

Well, well! All's past amend,
 Unchangeable. It must go.
 I seem but a dead man held on end
 To sink down soon O you could not know
 That such swift fleeing
 No soul foreseeing --
 Not even I -- would undo me so!

To describe his poetic technique, Hardy (ghosting his biography) thought of "the analogy of architecture", a profession in which he had been trained between 1856 and 1862. Donald Davie's argument is that Hardy's technique is not that of an architect or a carpenter or a stone mason, but that of a civil engineer: "its effective aesthetic is that of industrial technology in the age of heavy engineering". In Davie's view, the analogy is "with Victorian civil engineering"; in its concentration "on mechanical technology, on heavy engineering", Hardy's imagination resembles not another poet's, but Isambard Kingdom Brunel's. Consequently, Davie objects to "the stanzaic symmetry" of Hardy's poetry on the grounds that its characteristic structures "drive any lived experience out of sight". The symmetrical correspondences between the stanzas of **The Going** do no such thing. This final stanza – 'past amend', 'unchangeable', 'must go', 'dead man', 'sink down soon', 'undo me so' – is a catalogue of locutions which express Hardy's "immitigable acceptance" of Emma's death with rhythmical complexity and subtlety.

It is Chapter XLIII of **Far From the Madding Crowd** (1874) where Sergeant Troy discovers that Fanny Robin is lying in the coffin and exclaims to his wife Bathsheba: "This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be." An identical instant of anagnorisis informs **In the Moonlight**. This dramatic lyric is a 'satire of circumstance': that is, a poem in which a man's finest sentiments are satirised [= cruelly ridiculed] by the "indifferent" circumstances in which he finds himself. In this poem, Hardy interests himself in Wordsworth's intuition in his two Lucy poems, **Strange fits of passion have I known** and **She dwelt among the untrodden ways** (1798): that is, in the radical alteration that a

sudden death can make to the life of the living. During the lyric, a conversation occurs between two men: a 'lonely workman' and an inquisitive 'fool'. As the workman stands over a woman's grave, staring at it as if 'in a dream', the fool observes him. When asked by the foolish onlooker if the grave is the grave of the one whom he loved, the workman retorts:

Nay: she was the woman I did not love,
Whom all the others were ranked above,
Whom during her life I thought nothing of.

From this final tercet, we can see that, although the deceased woman had little influence on his life, the workman has been radically altered by her death: indeed, he would rather see her 'phantom' arise before him 'than all the living folk there be'. In this poem, Hardy concentrates not on the dead person, but on the living person whom she has left behind: in short, **In the Moonlight** is Sergeant Troy's poem. The precise focus is upon the devastating influence which the dead are able to exert over the living: especially when – as in Troy's case – the dead woman was not fully appreciated in life, the impact is "most poignantly felt".

THE WALK (1912)

Of course, there was a proleptic irony at Hardy's own expense, for his failure to appreciate his late wife is implicitly the subject-matter of **Poems of 1912-1913**, including **The Walk**. In the first stanza of this poem, Hardy describes a walk which he and his wife Emma enjoyed in the 'earlier days' of their relationship. After their relationship deteriorated, after she became 'weak and lame', he 'went alone' on the same walk and 'did not mind' that she was 'left behind'. In the second stanza, Hardy monitors his feelings as he takes the same walk in the immediate aftermath of her death:

What difference, then?
Only the underlying sense
Of the look of a room on returning thence.

The symmetry between the two stanzas serves to dramatise his changed perception: namely, that, although the 'ground' was 'familiar', there was a significant 'difference' to the way he felt on 'returning thence' [= to an empty house]. Although he thought little of his wife in her later life, he has been dramatically affected by her death: knowing that she will not now be there on his return, he cannot any longer go on his usual walk with equanimity. **The Walk**, then, focuses not on his own mortality, but on the 'difference' which hers has made to him.

BEENY CLIFF (1913)

On 27th November 1912, Hardy's wife Emma (whom he had married in 1874) died suddenly: even though it had not been a happy marriage, he found himself suffering such 'bereavement-pain' that in March 1913 he undertook a pilgrimage to those parts of Cornwall where he had courted her forty-three years before. Emma came from St Juliot in Cornwall: adjacent to this town is Beeny Crest, a magnificent cliff-top along which she used to ride her horse in the 1870s.

For this reason, **Beeny Cliff** is a topographical poem: that is, a poem which relies for its effects upon the poet's capacity to evoke the particular spirit of a place. In this poem, Hardy is to be imagined standing on Beeny Cliff in March 1913 and reflecting upon the transience of human happiness. His exact reflection is upon a specific day in March 1870 when Life – to quote **The Going** – 'unrolled [them] its very best'.

Beeny Cliff consists of five tercets in which the long lines – of fourteen or fifteen syllables – express Hardy's elegiac yearning for a particular moment in the distant past. In Verse I, that opening 'O' expresses his awe upon seeing again 'the opal and the sapphire' glints of the 'western sea' off Beeny Cliff; this marine vista becomes a mnemonic in that its white and blue tints rekindle his memory of 'the woman riding' upon the cliff-top, her 'bright hair flapping free'. In this perspective, his ironic epithet for Emma [the woman from whom he became estranged] is 'the woman whom I loved so'.

The poem takes the shape of a retrospection upon that day: 'that clear-sunned March day'. In Verse II, Hardy is able again to appreciate what a splendid vantage-point Beeny Cliff is. From its Olympian heights, he is able to recall how on that special day 'the pale mews plained below us' as if they patrolled 'a nether sky': using a metonym, he identifies the seagulls ('the pale mews') by their mewing cries; using a pun, he combines 'their ceaseless babbling' and their soaring in a single verb (complained/plained). Looking down upon the world, he and Emma 'laughed light-heartedly'; in both senses of the word, they were 'aloft' – literally [on Beeny Cliff] and emotionally [in high spirits].

In Verse III, Hardy is intent on showing that the day that he and Emma spent on 'beetling Beeny Cliff' was no ordinary day. He recalls that a shower of 'irised rain' fell, but that it did not last long; no sooner had 'a little cloud' taken the sheen off the Atlantic Ocean below them than 'the sun burst out again, and purples prinked the main': that is, other colours tinted the panoramic expanse of ocean. Everything glowed with a gleam.

In Verse IV, Hardy sets his courtship of Emma in its cosmic perspective: that is, 'against the chasmal beauty [of] old Beeny'. He constructs a rhetorical question which is ironic at the expense of his lost love: since Beeny Cliff 'still' – forty years on – presents its bulk 'to the sky', why don't they 'go there once again' and say 'the sweet things said' on the original occasion? The answer, of course, is that they can no longer do that because Emma is dead. By inviting this bleak answer, Hardy is seeking to measure his mortal happiness against the immortality of the Cornish landscape; his strategy is to establish a stark contrast between Beeny Cliff [a geological feature of the Cornish coast] and the couple who once 'loyally loved' there, but can do so no more.

Donald Davie quotes from W. H. Auden's introduction to the *Selected Writings of John Betjeman* (1947). It is in this introduction that Auden, in order to be precise about the kind of topographical poet that Betjeman is, comes up with the epithet "geological topophil". Like Hardy, Betjeman (1906-1984) values "the long temporal perspectives of geology" (Davie) for their capacity to put human accomplishment in its historical place. Davie's thesis is that, in such poetry, "the geological or geographical time scale" is responsible for a "cosmic irony": that is, an irony at man's expense.

Like A. E. Housman's *On Wenlock Edge, Beeny Cliff* is a form of geological topophilia; it uses the permanence of a geological landmark to illustrate the ironic impermanence of human attainment. In Verse V, Hardy's method is to juxtapose the primaevial rocks of Cornwall ('old Beeny') with his feelings of romantic elation, thereby to dramatise the shortcomings of those human feelings – both in 1870 and in 1913. Now that Emma is no longer alive, the 'chasmal beauty' of the red-veined rocks on 'that wild weird western shore' pales into insignificance; now that 'the woman whom the ambling pony bore' is no longer in any position to appreciate the coast-line, the coast-line has ceased to matter. Beautiful though its topography is, Beeny Cliff can no longer perform the function by which – in Hardy's imagination – it was sanctified: in short, it has lost its charm.

AT CASTLE BOTEREL (March 1913)

In this poem, Hardy, in the wake of Emma's death, finds himself expressing an attitude which spiritually supports him. According to Douglas Brown, the reasons for this "conspicuous triumph" are both formal and stylistic: "the short statements begin to move across the metrical pattern, itself contracting and expanding". Only infrequently are Hardy's plain statements coterminous with the ends of his lines; this technical resourcefulness ensures that the restrictions imposed by such a form do not re-position the natural inflections of the speaking voice and expel "the lived experience". Hardy's concise sentences –

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
A time of such quality, since or before,
In that hill's story? To one mind never,
Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
By thousands more

– carry on regardless of the expansions and contractions of the metre: in this adroit manner, he modernises the device of enjambment. Moreover, Davie comments on the "unusual plainness" of the style in which these stanzas are written. None of the "beautiful clumsiness" of **The Voice** ('wan wistlessness') or **After a Journey** ('with us twain, you tell?') for which John Wain finds himself apologising: in this poem, Hardy – in Harold Coombes' phrase (Pelican Guide No 7) – is writing "metrical and low-pitched rhymed prose". In this poem, it is by both his flexible form and the plain qualities of his diction and his syntax that Hardy guarantees the "integrity" of an extraordinary personal experience.

At Castle Boterel documents an instance of intense togetherness. Like **The Voice**, like **After a Journey**, it also records an instance of phantasmagoria: as a matter of literal fact, Hardy is looking back at the 'phantom figure' of Emma Gifford as she appeared to him in their courting days in the Cornish town of Boscastle (originally Castle of Bottreaux). He writes as if this vivid instant in their past, this moment at Castle Boterel, is attached by a supernatural force to a certain point upon the slope and is eternally imprinted there:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is – that we two passed.

It is significant that 'primaeval rocks' – previously indifferent to human endeavour – record the fact 'that we two passed'. By this cosmic image, Hardy is able to endow this 'time of such quality' with a permanence that befits it; by this imaginative tactic, he is able to raise it above 'the transitory in Earth's long order'. By these complex means, Hardy leaves us with the firm feeling that the moment when he and Emma Gifford 'passed' that spot forty years earlier has a secure existence outside time; indeed, he presents this comforting moment as a geological fact. **At Castle Boterel**, then, is a further example of geological topophilia. Despite the inexorable movement of time, this 'minute' – so it would seem – cannot be taken away from him and will remain inviolate. As such, this snatched 'minute' [= snatched from the hands of time] amounts to a heroic triumph.

In the final stanza, Hardy is resigned to the fact that he will never pass that way again and employs the image of an hour-glass ('for my sand is sinking') to convey this air of resignation. He accepts without mitigation that he will 'never again' be young and in love; what is more, he knows that he will 'never again' visit the special place (Boscastle) where he was young and in love and where he is presently able to commune with his loved one's ghost. Here, then, he is also making a heroic attempt to accept the fact of his own approaching death.

DURING WIND AND RAIN (1913)

If Thomas Hardy is our “greatest tragic poet”, then it is because he is able to accept with equanimity the tragic irony of the human condition: namely, that finite man must find an attitude to support himself in an infinite universe. There is no more complete expression of this acceptance than **During Wind and Rain**. Following Emma’s death, Hardy read some of her recollections of her early years in Plymouth and compounded them into this elegy for their brief lives. *Ubi sunt?* Both in its symmetrical form and in this theme, his elegy owes a great deal to Feste’s song at the end of **Twelfth Night**:

They change to a high new house,
He, she, all of them — aye,
Clocks and carpets and chairs
On the lawn all day,
And brightest things that are theirs
Ah no; the years, the years;
Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.

Hardy structures each of his four stanzas so that a moment from the ideal past is brought hard up against a moment from the real present: for example, the ‘change to a high new house’ (9 Bedford Terrace, Plymouth) conflicts ironically with the change that the ploughing rain-drop makes to their head-stones. In order to persuade us that this ironic change is entirely typical of human life, Hardy selects for each stanza simple details which are themselves typical of everyday life. In this way, he creates the solemn impression that there is nothing more to the business of human living than the swift reduction of our best endeavours to an eroded head-stone: the change to a ‘new house’ then is nothing beside the change to the head-stone now. He isolates his cast of archetypal characters in their natural state of flux and thus demonstrates how rapidly the excitement that goes with moving house recedes in the vast perspective of time.

Finally, **During Wind and Rain** relies for its symbolism upon Feste’s chorus: ‘For the rain, it raineth every day’ (Act V Scene 1). The poem trades upon the unsurprising fact that attitudes to time have altered little since that day when a mournful minstrel first coined for his folk-song the chorus-lines – ‘Ah no; the years O!’ and ‘Ah, no; the years, the years’ – which Hardy has borrowed. Douglas Brown remarks that these ballad-refrains “recollect the way men and women in all ages have found things to be”: in this case, they bear the burden of the realisation that wind and rain, themselves agents of erosion, are symbolic of the natural forces that wear away human existences. Life, according to Hardy, takes place during wind and rain.

THE OXEN (24th December, 1915)

His whole work springs out of an irrepressible instinct to hope for the best in conflict with a steady and obstinate conviction that the best is not to be – that the universe was not made to respond to human aspirations And some of his most subtle and poignant poetry depends on the antithesis between the squarely-faced certainty that something is not to be believed and the still persisting desire to believe it.

P. N. Furbank

It is equally important to Hardy that **The Oxen** should associate itself with the folk tradition because this ballad – like both **Neutral Tones** and **The Darkling Thrush** – bears the weight of an untraditional or even anti-traditional way of looking at the world. Acquainted by an old wife with the fanciful tale that oxen are always to be found kneeling on Christmas Eve, Hardy responds with four quatrains in which the rhymes alternate:

Yet I feel
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

In order to authenticate this anecdote, he employs two nouns which relate specifically to the rural scenes of his Stinsford childhood: 'barton' (a farmyard) and 'yonder coomb' (a wooded valley); such rustic touches enable the poem to pass without resistance into the realm of Wessex folk-lore. Such diction, of course, serves also to guarantee the integrity of the personal feeling: except for **The Darkling Thrush**, no poem better illustrates the emotional tension which Furbank perceives in Hardy's poetry. For here Hardy states honestly that, if a religious elder were to ask, then he would go with him in the literal 'gloom' of the midnight hour, 'hoping' that he might see there something to lift the metaphorical 'gloom' in which he – as a pessimistic agnostic – lives life; he is 'hoping' against hope that he may see in the symbolic genuflection of these 'meek mild creatures' something to convert him. Although Hardy goes in good faith, he is clearly expecting that our own reading of experience will imagine the final tableau for him: when he gets to 'their strawy pen', the beast will all be firmly on their feet. In this respect, they are no different from 'the fallow deer'.

AFTERWARDS (1916)

Being an adverb, the title of this poem does not make sense except in relation to a verb; as such, it begs the question: after what? after what event are the sentiments of the poem being expressed? The answer, of course, is that they are to be imagined as having been expressed after the poet's life has ended/after he has died. For the purpose of this poem, Hardy is speculating what his bereaved friends will say of him after his life is over: that is, 'afterwards'. He is wondering what, in the opinion of his friends, his epitaph will be. Hardy's own hope is that he will be remembered as a sensitive appreciator of the natural world: 'He was a man who used to notice such things'. Above all, he sees himself as a student of the 'mysteries 'of Nature who has acute powers of observation; this being so, he wants to be remembered as an ecologist who had a special sympathy with animals on which he prided himself. In the final analysis, Hardy values nothing about himself more than his tender affinity with non-human creatures: eg. 'the hedgehog which travels furtively over the lawn'.

In **An August Midnight**, a poem of 1899, Hardy declares his religious respect for every kind of insect – 'a longlegs, a moth', 'a dumbledore' and 'a sleepy fly'; even though they 'besmear' the page on which he is writing, he not only gives his four 'guests' a dignified welcome, but also accords to them a superior wisdom. In **Snow in the Suburbs**, he extends a particular compassion towards a black cat, 'wide-eyed and thin'. **Last Words to a Dumb Friend** (2nd October, 1904) is an utterly serious elegy for a cat in which the 'mourned' animal, 'by the merely taking hence/Of his insignificance', becomes charged with significance.

Ultimately, **Afterwards** relies for its elegiac effect upon the irony of the human condition: that man is a finite creature in an infinite world. What exercises Hardy, in writing this elegy for himself at the age of 76, is the thought that in five, ten or actually twelve years' time the supreme achievement of his life will count for nothing: in short, the certainty of his death gives point to his life. In twelve years' time, Thomas Hardy – sharp-eyed lepidopterist, ornithologist, zoologist and astronomer – will exist only as a memory; following the death of this naturalist, the triumphs of his life (especially his empathy with 'innocent creatures') will be gone and on the verge of being forgotten.

To make this point, Hardy brings each quatrain to rest upon an ironic reflection. In the first quatrain, there is an ironic contrast between the lustrous life of the spring foliage and the death of the very man 'who used to notice such things'. In the second quatrain, there is an ironic contrast between the bleak 'wind-warped' landscape across which a 'hawk' continues to fly and the recent death of the naturalist to whom 'this must have been a familiar sight'. In the third quatrain, there is an ironic contrast between the 'hedgehog' which 'travels furtively over the lawn' and the man who loved 'such innocent creatures', but who 'now is gone'. In the fourth quatrain, there is an ironic contrast between the 'full-starred' winter sky and the dead man 'who had an eye for such mysteries'. Most ironically of all, Hardy's strategy in the fifth quatrain is to develop a contrast between the sound of his own funeral knell ('my bell of quittance') and his inevitable failure to hear it; it is ironic that he, whose funeral it now is, 'used to notice such things'. Put another way, it is ironic that the natural/non-human world carries on regardless of the deaths of those human beings who enjoyed a sensitive, sympathetic relationship with it.

In **Afterwards**, the function of the language is to convey Hardy's detailed and intense appreciation of the natural world. To intensify this appreciation, he uses a number of compound-adjectives. Each of these adjectives relies upon a close observation of the natural phenomenon. In the first case, Hardy coins two adjectives – 'delicate-filmed', 'new-spun' – in order to convey more accurately the luminous texture of the foliage. In the second case, Hardy coins an adjective which – by means of alliteration ('wind-warped') – suggests the force of the wind. In the third case, Hardy mints an adjective ('full-starred') which tells us how densely clustered together the stars are.

In addition, there are four euphemistic forms of circumlocution which Hardy uses to keep the fact of his death at a distance: 'the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay', 'stilled', 'nocturnal blackness', 'my bell of quittance'. In the first case, Hardy imagines that dying will be no more momentous than leaving a garden and shutting a gate ('postern') behind him. In the second case, he presses into unusual activity the past participle of the intransitive verb 'to still'. In the third case, he finds for 'night' a form of metonymy which declines to emphasise the cold and bleak fate which awaits him. In the fourth case, he comes up with a genitive phrase in which the archaic abstract noun 'quittance' suggests that death belongs only in a remote world. From the loss to the rural world that these descriptions stress, Hardy's own obituary acquires its powerful, poignant tone.

HE NEVER EXPECTED MUCH (1926)

F. R. Leavis does write that "Hardy's great poetry is a triumph of character" and applauds the "adequacy of his response". There is no doubt that the poem which Hardy wrote in consideration of his eighty-sixth birthday is totally in the stoical character of the poet who could write **Neutral Tones** and then fifty-two years later complete **The Oxen**. **He Never Expected Much** is wickedly ironic at the expense of the reader who complacently presumes that we live in a cosier and rosier world than Hardy's Wessex:

Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
Kept faith with me;
Upon the whole you have proved to be
Much as you said you were.
Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own, expected I
That life would all be fair.

The wry wisdom of the poem – "If you never expect anything, then you'll never be disappointed" – is undeniably homespun; the "character" that it shows is unique. In those

first four lines, Hardy seduces the self-satisfied reader into feeling that he is self-satisfied too: if the World has 'kept faith' with him, then – it's nice to know – the old boy cannot feel that it has let him down Well, yes: except that it has 'kept faith' with him *only in the sense that it has continually let him down!* His eighty-six years of life have gone to show not that the World isn't too bad a place after all, but that – on the contrary – it can be relied upon only to treat a fellow unfairly. The best that it can 'promise' is not much: 'just neutral-tinted haps and such'. Thus Thomas Hardy's career completes itself: it comes to rest – where it began – upon the recognition that moral courage is the only truly adequate response to the indifferent world in which we live.

APPENDIX

In his novels, Hardy's treatment of fallen women (Fanny Robin, Tess Durbeyfield) is especially sympathetic. His early poems too express a particular concern for the plight of peasant girls who have fallen prey to wealthy gentlemen. "She was poor, but honest" was a theme of Victorian melodrama. Below follow three different treatments of this theme:

SHE AT HIS FUNERAL (1898)

In this poem, Hardy's aim is to highlight an injustice that exists in Victorian society. For its effect, **She at His Funeral** – originally entitled 'Her Dilemma' – relies heavily upon its title: first, Hardy's title makes us wonder who 'she' is; second, it describes to us the situation in which 'she' finds herself. What, we ask ourselves, is 'she' doing 'at his funeral'? What is so special about her presence there that it demands Hardy's attention? The answer is to be found in the conflict between the pronouns in this poem: between the female figure ('she') and the mourners who follow 'his' coffin ('they'). It becomes clear that 'they' are the members of the dead man's family and that 'she' by contrast is a 'stranger' to this family-gathering who must follow the pall-bearers at a distance ('space'). The fourth line of the first quatrain illustrates this social division by means of its comma: on one side of the caesura are his 'kindred'; on the other is his 'sweetheart'.

In the second quatrain, Hardy hints at the reason why the 'sweetheart' has been excluded from the funeral; it is because 'she' is of a lower social class than her deceased lover. Hardy differentiates between the dead man and his sweetheart in sartorial terms: whereas she is wearing an 'unchanged gown of garish dye', his family is attired in 'sable' [= black] clothing suitable for the solemn occasion. That 'gown of garish dye' is a signifier: in all probability, his 'sweetheart'/his mistress is a prostitute, most likely a kept woman.

Hardy's point is that 'she' is an incongruous figure at the funeral of her own lover; she is so poor – for example, farm-worker or maid-servant turned whore – that she can afford only one dress and that dress she has had to dye in order both to conceal its shabbiness and to advertise her wares. But she is also an incongruous figure for a more important reason; namely, that, while his family 'stand round with griefless eye', indifferent to his passing, she expresses her profound feeling of loss 'like fire'. By contrast with his blood-relations, 'she' feels an acute sense of 'regret'. Hardy's simile ('like fire') stresses that people of a lower class – even if they are whores – are more capable of compassion, more likely to show a degree of humanity, than their supposed superiors; it is upon this irony that the poem comes to rest; ironically, 'she' is the one who feels more deeply. At the same time, her 'fire' may burn so fiercely because her gentleman has died and left her penniless (if she was a kept woman) and with child (as Fanny and Tess were also left).

THE RUINED MAID (written 1866, published 1901)

By any standards, this dramatic lyric is a considerable accomplishment, a magnificent achievement. It is a satire of Victorian double standards: at once, it has to be said that, if it is a humorous criticism of them, then it is more critical than humorous. Here, if anywhere, is his "fine eye for absurd discrepancies" on which A. J. Guerard comments.

Hardy's nomenclature supplies an immediate clue to his theme: namely, the strategy by which a 'raw country girl' has managed to ameliorate her situation in life. By calling his heroine 'Amelia', he is indicating that this poem will examine the means by which this country girl has *made better* her lot in Victorian society. Furthermore, there is a proleptic irony in the title, for the epithet 'ruined maid' will turn out to be ironic.

The poem takes the shape of a dialogue between two 'raw country girls', one of them – Amelia – who has mysteriously gone up in the world and the other (never named) who has met her former friend after an interval of years. In the first quatrain, the unnamed country girl expresses surprise, not only that she should meet Amelia 'in Town', but also that Amelia should be wearing 'such fair garments'; from this reaction, it is clear that she thought that Amelia (like Fanny Robin) was in the workhouse or worse. Amelia's sarcastic answer ("O didn't you know I'd been ruined?") turns upon the ironic use of the adjective 'ruined'.

In the second quatrain, the unnamed country girl recalls her past history in which both Amelia and herself earned their meagre livings on the land. She tries to reconcile their previous poverty as agricultural labourers with Amelia's new-found prosperity; she tries without success to explain away the 'gay' finery in which Amelia is dressed. Once more, Amelia gives a sarcastic answer to the effect that only 'ruined' farm-labourers can aspire to such sartorial elegance ('feathers three').

In the third quatrain, the unnamed country girl passes comments on Amelia's ameliorated speech-style. She notices that Amelia no longer speaks in a rural dialect and that her 'talking' is now done in a refined accent, suitable for high society ('high company'). This time, Amelia retorts with a more profound remark that social 'polish' can accompany ruin [= can come with moral decline].

In the fourth quatrain, the unnamed country girl admires Amelia's physical condition. She notices that her hands and her face ('delicate cheek') glow with health: that Amelia can boast lady-like hands and a perfect complexion. This observation enables Amelia to remark that moral ruin is not inconsistent with both physical and material wealth: in other words, she is proud to be among the idle rich. Her disingenuous retort – "We never do work when we're ruined" – exploits the double meaning of the adjective.

In the fifth quatrain, Hardy explores the ironic inconsistency between Amelia's unhappiness when her home was a farm cottage and her *joie de vivre* in her present circumstances. She no longer suffers from migraines or clinical depression ('melancholy'), but instead rejoices (is 'pretty lively') in her current life-about-town.

In the final quatrain, the raw country girl expresses a natural aspiration to emulate Amelia; she wishes that she too could wear 'a fine sweeping gown' and 'strut about town'. Amelia's patronising retort illuminates Victorian hypocrisy, for she contends that no woman in such a corrupt society can expect to enjoy a life of leisure unless she has in some way been 'ruined': that is, unless she has in some way prostituted herself. Ultimately, then, Hardy's poem is not a comic poem, for it conducts a profound analysis of the economic and ethical circumstances in which poor Victorian women found themselves.

THE DARK-EYED GENTLEMAN (1909)

Not altogether dissimilar is **The Dark-Eyed Gentleman**, another poem enjoyable for its racy wit. It is a dramatic monologue, an expertly crafted narrative which relies for its drama upon an ironic turn of phrase. The characteristic symmetry between the three seven-line stanzas is behind the fluency with which it moves towards its conclusion.

The speaker of this poem is a peasant girl, fresh from working in the summer fields. In the first stanza, this innocent girl, hastening home along Crimmercrock Lane, puts down her bundle of gleaned corn [= 'leazings'] in order to tie up her garter. As she does so, a 'dark-eyed gentleman' passes by and, upon spying her 'pretty knee', gallantly offers to help her with it: "Let me do that for you," he may have said. In the second stanza, it becomes clear that he did rather more than tie up her garter for her. In each stanza, 'tie up my garter for me' becomes another way of saying 'had sex with me'.

This story, however, does not take a tragic turn. Although she learns how 'easy' it is 'to lose what we nevermore find', her tale does not end in tears; although an anonymous stranger takes her virginity, all's well that ends well. In the third stanza, the peasant girl reports that 'a fine lissom lad' was the issue of that casual union on Crimmercrock Lane; these days, she is 'not sad' because her son is her 'own dearest joy', her 'comrade and friend'; she has, if you like, another 'dark-eyed gentleman' in her life. As a result, she is 'thankful' that she once had casual sex by the roadside. For the final time, Hardy's cheeky, euphemistic refrain ('tie up my garter for me') encodes what happened and treats that event with a light touch, an almost Gladstonian refusal to condemn or even deplore.

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