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Conversing Stances in Hardy's Shorter Poems

by FREDERICK W. SHILSTONE

WHEN THOMAS HARDY abandoned prose fiction in 1895 in the midst of an onslaught of public abuse and his own attempts at personal vindication, he found it necessary to continue speaking to himself and the reading public through a literary medium. Turning to poetry, he published short lyrics he had been composing and accumulating throughout his adult life, and added greatly to that canon up until his death in 1928. Many reasons have been offered to explain Hardy's devotion to poetry in his later years, ranging from the obvious desire to avoid public abuse and controversy to the more abstract æsthetic need to take advantage of the range and lack of vulnerability available to the chameleon poet.¹ Added to all these reasons were the philosophic revelations and personal insights to which Hardy's career as a fiction writer had eventually led.

Victorian novelists were on the whole regarded as moral guides and thinkers as well as entertainers; Hardy was no exception. John Holloway naturally grouped him with essayists like Carlyle and Newman and professed moralists of the George Eliot school when he sought to define *The Victorian Sage* (London, 1953). While Holloway's attempt to attribute a consistent and extractible philosophy to Hardy's works is not entirely convincing, and given that Hardy himself denied his fictional narrator the role of a reliable thinker,² the novels still give the illusion that they are meant to illustrate moral and philosophical truths; Hardy did respond to the wants of his public. Forced at least to pretend that his narrator was a thinker and commentator on human affairs, Hardy created for himself an æsthetic dilemma. Spurred by the need to insulate himself from the ironies and tragedies that appeared to him the sum of life, he evolved a fictional stance that eventually became untenable.

When Hardy allowed his character Joseph Poorgress to cast a skeptical eye on the stock pastoral ending of *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), he avoided the problems that arose when he began increasingly to have his narrator express similar doubts and otherwise comment at

1. See Paul Zietlow's *Moments of Vision: The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (Harvard U. P., 1974), pp. 38-64, for a comprehensive discussion of how Hardy's developing aesthetic led him to be more comfortable with the poetic mode.

2. As he does, for example, in *Jude the Obscure*: "The purpose of a chronicler of moods and deeds does not require him to express his personal views upon the grave controversy above given." See *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Irving Howe (Boston: Riverside Edition, 1965), p. 228. This edition is cited below, parenthetically in the text, as *JO*.

will. The more that narrator revealed about the futility of human life, the more Hardy sought to protect himself from the resulting tragedies. As a result, his narrator — and, I suspect, he himself — tended to become almost crassly ironic and detached. The offhand comment about the “President of the Immortals” completing his “sport with Tess” at the end of Hardy’s penultimate novel attests to this forced detachment, as does the narrator’s painful remark in Hardy’s last piece of prose fiction: “Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked [Jude] his trouble. . . . But nobody did come, because nobody does” (*JO*, p. 27). Paradoxically, though, this stance led, in *Jude the Obscure*, to a terminal vision in which Hardy could no longer be satisfied with the comforts afforded by his and his narrator’s awareness of the ironies to which most people blindly submit. For in his last novel, Hardy, as if standing at a distance and sneering at his own life, applied the ironic narrative vision to a past uncomfortably close to his own.

Jude the Obscure has experiences and, more importantly, thoughts that point to documented counterparts in Hardy’s early years. While Hardy had previously used his own past as the bare framework for the romance *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in *Jude the Obscure*, a work the author categorized as a “Novel of Character and Environment” (thus placing it at a more important level than the earlier idyll), the connections are more fundamental. Jude’s youthful desire to achieve the highest possible level of learning despite his humble background stems in part from Hardy’s own early dissatisfactions; Jude’s stonemasonry is a counterpart to Hardy’s early work as an architect; Sue Bridehead is, as has long been noted, close in character to Hardy’s cousin Tryphena Sparks; and, finally, Jude’s philosophic nature is much like the one Hardy often attributed to himself.³ The dilemma for Hardy and his narrator was clear: now was the novelist to insulate himself from the ironies of the world by maintaining a distant and almost crassly uncaring attitude about what was in essence his own life? These two problems — the unnatural lack of sympathy inherent in the fictional narrator’s unwaveringly ironic view, and Hardy’s inability to keep facts of his own life out of the bleak world picture he was drawing — account as much as any other factor for his decision to devote himself exclusively to poetry after the horribly depressing demise of Jude Fawley.

In poetry, Hardy was not constrained even to maintain the illusion that his narrator was a consistent sage and moralist; he described his own poems (and, in essence, all verse) as “dramatic monologues by different characters”⁴ illustrating “little cohesion of thought or harmony

3. J. Hillis Miller, in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Harvard U.P., 1970), pp. 1-3, notes direct parallels between Hardy’s description of the early philosophizing of Jude and his account of his own youthful thoughts as dictated to his second wife for inclusion in her *Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (London, 1962).

4. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1925), p. 175. Hereafter, this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CP*.

of colouring" (*CP*, p. 75). Little cohesion there is; yet, the poems are not without interrelationships. Throughout the shorter lyrics of Hardy are heard various voices, some held over from kindred ones in his fiction, others apparently in the nature of attempted solutions to the terminal vision reached in *Jude the Obscure*. As if in conversation, these voices modify each other and account for the wide diversity of themes and sentiments found from *Wessex Poems* through *Winter Words*. In his attempt to avoid apathetic cruelty toward others and a sense of his own tragic involvement in a meaningless existence, Hardy set up an aesthetic dialogue that exploits all ranges of the poetic scale.

Most clearly allied with the novelist's protective but unfeeling detachment from the world depicted in *Jude the Obscure* are Hardy's blatantly ironic poems — what he called in one of his descriptive volume titles "Satires of Circumstance." The ironic construct in these poems is unique and consistent. Primarily stemming from situation rather than verbal manipulation, the irony here provides the relating persona — one of the chief conversing voices in Hardy's collected lyrics — with the same sort of detachment available to his fictional counterpart. The speaker's task is to observe and evaluate; as a tool of Hardy the ironist, he looks from a distance at the self-deceptions which are the norm of existence for a human race he seeks to avoid. Like an omniscient god, he maintains a detachment which allows him to see truths that other mortals fail to recognize. As if to enforce his own sense of superiority, the speaker and other characters in the fifteen "Satires of Circumstance" revel in possessing a knowledge that others lack: "the happy young housewife does not know" ("At Tea," *CP*, p. 391); "For she won't know" ("By Her Aunt's Grave," *CP*, p. 392); "Well, bliss is in ignorance" ("At a Watering Place," *CP*, p. 393); "But their folks don't know" ("In the Cemetery," *CP*, p. 394). What the ironic voice usually does realize — what sets it apart from the ignorant victims it speaks of — is the passage of time and the folly it makes of human pretensions. Unlike the disparity between "appearance" and "reality" that is frequently the basis for ironic exposure, the revelation here most often stems from a particularly strong juxtaposition of "then and now" or "now and some time in the future," and depends on the disparities so revealed — as perfectly expressed in the title of the lyric "Known Had I" (*CP*, p. 774).

In "Yell'ham-Wood's Story," Hardy's speaker exploits a natural metaphor to define his ironic concept of human life. "Coomb Firtrees" and "Clyff-hill Clump," two expanses of firs, reinforce the ironist's bleak vision; because the trees here are uniformly barren all year long, and partly due to the moaning sound emitted by their branches when wind-blown, they offer no promises and provide no fulfillments. On the opposite hand is Yell'ham-Wood, a deciduous stand that blossoms grandly in the spring only to succumb later to the ravages of time, thus enforcing what the ironist knows and what the pathetic victims of his vision fail to real-

ize — "Life offers — to deny!" (*CP*, p. 280). What looks beautiful now will eventually fade; anyone who fails to grasp this essential fact must inevitably fall victim to the ironist's cold eye. By knowing the futility of accepting the offerings of the moment, the speaker in Hardy's ironic poems achieves protective detachment. In the "Satires of Circumstance: In Fifteen Glimpses," the generally discompassionate speaker reveals the tragic ignorance of all those who find seeming beauty, logic, and, most of all, permanence in the events of their lives.

Among the "Satires of Circumstance," "In the Cemetery" stands definitive. Here, the human sense of self-importance, represented in the mothers' misguided quibbling over whose children lie in which graves, is shown to mean absolutely nothing over the course of the years; no matter whose children were buried where, time, with the help of a "new laid drain," has rendered any concern about the issue absurd. As always, the irony results from a lack of human awareness: "But their folks don't know" (*CP*, p. 394). Time serves as a complex revealer; even though the irony of the situation, arising from the mothers' ignorance of the fact that all their children lie in a distant mass grave, is not directly revealed by time (there is no then/now dichotomy), natural process does serve a most vital function. The mothers base their sense of self-importance on specific past events, the individual burials of their children. For each of them, one event is isolated; the children were all buried there at some specific time, and thus, for each mother, her child — and hers alone — is buried there forever. Over time however, as the cemetery workman reveals, all the children have been placed in the same plot of ground and, further, have finally been removed from it altogether. The irony thus arises from each mother's belief in the permanence of the moment of her child's interment, showing in essence an ignorance of the passage of time, and making all the mothers victims of ironic disclosure. The speaker maintains his detachment throughout, even seeming somewhat arrogant about his protected position; he goes so far as to lend a perverse humor to the cemetery man's description of the burials of the children: "But all their children were laid therein / At different times, like sprats in a tin" (*CP*, p. 393).

In "In the Moonlight," a man's failure to capture the infinite moment of foreordained love is made pathetically evident by the ultimate assertion of time's control over man, the death of the woman he *should* have loved. Time functions even more strongly here than in "In the Cemetery." The man's reasons for failing to love the woman whose grave he confronts are not explicitly stated. Little doubt exists, however, that there was a conscious act of rejection, or at least indifference, on his part:

"she was the woman I did not love
Whom all the others were ranked above,
Whom during her life I thought nothing of." (*CP*, p. 398)

The speaker has obviously taken the woman for granted, feeling she would always be available should his other amorous adventures fail. Her death reveals the naiveté of his belief. The complex irony of the situation arises from the workman's failure to seize his foreordained love when he had the opportunity to do so. He has ignored time, and thus opened himself to ironic exposure, by failing to realize the woman would eventually die. Her death reveals the irony, but the genesis of the situation lies nowhere but in the actions of the ignorant "lonely workman." Unlike most of the "Satires of Circumstance," there are hints of compassion in the speaker's presentation of this situation; we see none of the black humor so strikingly evident in the other poems in the series. Its placement at the end of the group invites speculation that here, as in his later novels, Hardy was troubled by the lack of feeling inherent in the detached and protected position of the knowing ironist.

In poetry, unlike in prose, the abandonment of a stance does not mean the rejection of an art form; Hardy needed only to evolve a new voice to converse with any one he found in itself insufficient. Unable to remain a detached observer of the futile workings of time-bound humanity, he could no more sustain the vision of the "Satires of Circumstance" than he could that of *Jude the Obscure*. He became guilty about the lack of compassion in his ironic voice, and could not avoid the realization of his own involvement in many of the situations he was depicting. The lyric "I Look Into My Glass" embodies the sort of awareness that forced Hardy out of the ironic mode. Here the speaker — undeniably close to Hardy himself — realizes that time has the power to reveal incongruities, and that he is strongly tempted to somehow open himself to the uncertainties of transience: "Time, to make me grieve, / Part steals, lets part abide" (*CP*, p. 72). Hardy wants to abandon the cold, detached position of the ironist, but can do so only by attempting to defeat the cause of irony; given that Hardy's irony stems from an acute awareness of time and natural process, it is not surprising that an attempt to defeat those forces constitutes Hardy's abandonment of and assault on his own ironic position.

The answer to Hardy's ironic voice takes shape as an attempt to defeat time the revealer and is embodied in a number of poems of memory, many of which are based in the poet's own intensely personal recollections. Since Hardy — explicitly in works like "God-Forgotten" (*CP*, p. 112) and "The Sleep-Worker" (*CP*, p. 110) — fills his poems with rejections of all common religious attempts to deny the power of time and finality of death, he turns instead to his own past and, rather than viewing it ironically as in *Jude the Obscure*, attempts to evolve a mythology based in personal experience, to involve himself in a life which the detached persona of the "Satires of Circumstance" seeks only to observe. Frank Kermode's definition of myth, a construct he opposes to fiction, reveals why Hardy was attracted to the idea of attempting to create a

mythology from the materials of his own life: "Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths *make sense in terms of a lost order of time* . . . fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now. . . ."⁵ Any number of Hardy's poems reveal the desire to mythologize the poet's past in these very terms, to make that past live in the present and future, and thereby to conquer time. The mythologizing process involves the poet's looking back on some particular happening in his history, seizing upon certain details, and arranging them into a meaningful construct endowed with permanence. In many instances, Hardy associates event with place, and thus endows his memory with the recurrent, undying quality of the landscape. In poems in which a personal recollection — perhaps the memory of some moment in Hardy's love affair with his first wife — achieves mythical status for the poet, a prominent place is used as a lasting, tangible symbol of that specific recollection. In "Places," for example, the speaker reveals the strong meaning particular spots in the landscape hold for him and no one else. They possess this significance because they are associated in his mind with specific elements of his evolving personal myth. That myth, if successful, defeats time; the past lives in the present; the permanent mythological becomes, for the moment, more real than the transient actual:

one there is to whom these things,
That nobody else's mind calls back,
Have a savour that scenes in being lack,
And a presence more than the actual brings. (*CP*, p. 332)

"The House of Hospitalities" involves a similar process. Here the associated object is man-made rather than natural, but its place in the personal myth is the same as that of Beeny Cliff or Boterel Hill. The poet can associate a specific incident from his past with the house, and thus is able to achieve a sense of permanence, to "see forms of old time talking, / Who smile on me" (*CP*, p. 192). Elements of folk tradition also enter into many of these poems of memory, for the obvious reason that they are in themselves a type of myth; when they are incorporated into Hardy's personal vision of his past, they achieve a double level of permanence, one inherent and one imposed, and thus become particularly valuable in the attempt to conquer time. In "The Oxen" (*CP*, p. 439), for example, Hardy expresses the obvious attractiveness of the tradition surrounding the rustic belief that cattle kneel in prayer on Christmas Eve. The two elements of personal history — particularly that surrounding Hardy's love affairs — and folk tradition provide the basis in the actual for Hardy's attempt to create a meaningful individual myth. In works such as "Places" and "The House of Hospitalities," Hardy succeeds in making time irrelevant, turns past into present and, at

5. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford U. P., 1966), p. 39. The emphases are mine.

least for the duration of the individual poems, achieves the desired quality of permanence.

Hardy provides the best definition of the mythmaking process in "Joys of Memory," a poem dealing with the location of a specific day, rather than a place, in his personal history. The poet is successful in his quest to avoid the ironies of time when the process described in this poem is fruitfully realized:

When the spring comes round, and a certain day
Looks out from the brume by the eastern copsetrees
And says, Remember,
I begin again, as if it were new,
A day of like date I once lived through,
Whiling it hour by hour away;
So shall I do till my December,
When spring comes round. (*CP*, p. 410)

This poem is intensely personal; it refers to the day in 1870 when Hardy met his first wife, Emma Gifford.⁶ The past moment is so brilliant that it can, at certain times, live in the present; the historical event is more obviously alive than the immediate moment. In poems such as "Joys of Memory," and only in these poems, time becomes an illusion for Hardy. By conquering time, Hardy achieves, for the span of a few short lyrics, an escape from irony which avoids apathetic detachment from the sufferings of others. The obsessive wish to conquer time that gave rise to these poems of memory carried throughout Hardy's life; it accounts for his fascination with the theory of relativity, evidenced both in *Mrs. Hardy's Life*⁷ and in the poem "The Absolute Explains" (*CP*, p. 720).

Despite the solace and escape achieved in the poems of memory, Hardy's poetry as a whole reveals that the attempt to conquer time and the ironies it uncovers is by no means a complete success. Process impinges upon the personal myth and its creator in a number of ways, and in so doing involves the poet in a self-directed irony similar to that revealed by the detached speaker of the "Satires of Circumstance." In the poems which exhibit this self-irony, the speaker, intimately involved in life, realizes the innocence and ignorance of his attempt to create a personal myth, and thus reveals the futility of his own situation in a relatively painless manner. In "An Anniversary," for example, the speaker makes a forced attempt in the first stanza to delude himself into thinking that a specific past event can be recreated in all its details, only to reveal in the second stanza that such an attempt is absurd. Time has passed and changes are evident, particularly in the humans who enacted the earlier drama: "the man's eyes then were not so sunk that you saw the socket bones" (*CP*, p. 442). In a similar lyric, "The Man Who Forgot,"

6. Here and elsewhere, finding the occasions for and references in various poems has been greatly facilitated by J. O. Bailey's *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (U. of North Carolina Press, 1970).

7. F. E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p. 419.

based upon a specific recollection of Hardy's love affair with Emma Gifford, the speaker loses himself in the past, forgets, probably intentionally, that time has passed, and then reawakens with a jolt into the present. The passage of time is imaged in the disappearance of the house that the speaker, in his delusion, expected to find:

My right mind woke, and I stood dumb;
Forty years' frost and flower
Had fled since I'd used to come
To meet her in that bower. (*CP*, p. 504)

In his innocence, he has superimposed the house, which to him represents the memory of the event, on a scene now barren. Since time has removed the symbol of the event in the speaker's mind, the poet must realize the irony of his attempt to recreate a past moment; the wish to mythologize leads here to self-directed irony. A more general expression of this process of realization is "The Selfsame Song." In apparent answer to Keats's fleeting claim of immortality for his nightingale, Hardy employs his recurrent delusion/realization motif to express the sentiment that however much he wants to believe in the total resuscitation of a past experience, here one that was centered on the bird's song, he knows well that he is hearing a different animal and that, by extension, the past event is dead, no matter how desperately he wishes to revive it:

— But it's not the selfsame bird. —
No: perished to dust is he . . .
As also those who heard
That song with me. (*CP*, p. 566)

The poet's realization of his own delusion, and thus of the irony in his attempt to conquer time, is a basic stance of the creator of "The Selfsame Song."

Hardy provides a number of conclusive statements to the attempt, and ultimate failure, to permanently mythologize his past. The desire to "make sense in terms of a lost order of time," to enshrine certain details of the poet's history in the realm of the immortal, falls victim to the very processes it attempts to defeat, and dies a graceful, if somewhat pathetic, death. The lyric "A Dream or No" sounds one final note in the myth-making drama. The speaker here asks rhetorically, "Why go to Saint-Juliot? What's Juliot to me?" (*CP*, p. 327). Anyone familiar with Hardy's love poems and the facts they are based in is fully aware of why the speaker should make the projected journey; he is going to meet Emma Gifford. A trip to Saint-Juliot, actual or merely poetical, would represent a new attempt to elevate events of the poet's past to mythical status. But in "A Dream or No," the power to do this is gone. Rather than attempt to endow specific details with a sense of permanence, the speaker expresses a strong doubt that the love itself, and the place that should stand as its tangible symbol in the myth, exist now or, indeed, ever existed:

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Does there even a place like Saint-Juliot exist?
 Or a Vallency Valley
 With a stream and leafed alley,
 Or Beeny, or Bos with its flounce flinging mist? (*CP*, p. 328)

With the termination of the mythmaker's consciousness, whether through a bereavement that makes him unable to believe in his power over time, or through his own death, the ultimate destruction of the myth through the obliteration of the mind that created it, time emerges triumphant; any attempt to ignore this triumph is, as always, painfully ironic. Perhaps the final statement is best expressed in the last three lines of "At Castle Boterel," where the speaker confesses that

my sand is sinking
 And I shall traverse old love's domain
 Never again. (*CP*, p. 331)

He is unable to maintain the illusion that certain moments of his past can live forever; process has asserted its control. With this awareness of time's dominance comes the revelation of the ironies inherent in Hardy's attempts at mythmaking. There are no eternal moments; anyone who claims there are is betraying an ignorance of life.

The three primary voices I have discussed here — those of the detached, superior ironist, the mythmaking observer of a personal past, and the aging realist who comments wearily on the inevitable failure of his mythologizing counterpart to defeat time the revealer — are in conversation throughout Hardy's collected poems. Many other voices are, of course, also heard; the cumulative effect of Hardy's lyrics leaves one with the impression that the poet defined himself when he spoke of a "Protean Maiden" in one of his later lyrics: "This single girl is two girls" (*CP*, p. 771). This single voice is many voices, and they often converse. The dramatic interaction of the stances this essay has been concerned with shows how Hardy could work out problems when freed from demands for narrative consistency. The poet may avoid commitment by remaining ironically detached from human tragedy, but that stance results in a troubling lack of compassion. He may devote himself to his own past loves as a precious and meaningful way of facing life's transience, only to find that love, like everything else, grows old and dies. Time unveils the irony of his commitment, and the "I told you so" voice of poems like "The Selfsame Song" is an ever-present reminder of the futility of permanent beliefs. Hence, J. Hillis Miller's claim, in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, that Hardy avoided the inevitable tragedy of life by remaining detached from it throughout his literary career in his role as an artist is only partially correct. In poems like the "Satires of Circumstance," and in most of the novels, Hardy does escape ironies by avoiding commitment. But his verse as a whole reveals a far more complete and personal drama in which the writer consciously attempts to abandon detachment, and does so through the

voices evolved in the poems of memory. Confronted with the self-directed irony that arises from this involvement in life, Hardy finally finds solace in continuing to change voices from poem to poem, in constantly contradicting himself by "recording diverse readings of [life's] phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change" (*CP*, p. 75).

It is not surprising that Hardy eventually attempted epic drama in *The Dynasts*; he had been working with conversing voices throughout his shorter poems. To accomplish his aim of involving himself in life while at the same time occasionally escaping the ironies he consistently saw there, Hardy lived in the often contradictory voices of his poetic speakers, and so avoided the bleak celebration of death voiced by his own "Mad Judy" (*CP*, p. 138) and put into action by the aptly named Father Time in *Jude the Obscure*. The final strength of Hardy's Protean vision is that his poetic voices not only converse, but learn from each other as well. For in many poems very unlike those I have spoken of here — ballads like "The Dance at the Phoenix" (*CP*, p. 38) and "A Trampwoman's Tragedy" (*CP*, p. 182), for instance — the results of Hardy's involvement in the pleasures and inevitable ironies of his own past are manifested in a sense of compassion for others that is lacking in the "Satires of Circumstance."⁸ The drama of Hardy's poetry has no heroes and villains, no beginning, middle, and end; it merely has voices that allow their creator to do what he seemed unable to accomplish in the medium of prose fiction: to give a contradictory response to what was for him the most contradictory of worlds.

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⁸ For an excellent discussion of the vital compassionate strain in Hardy's verse, see Paul Zietlow's *Moments of Vision*, pp. 93-122 and *passim*.