

LIGHT IN NOVEMBER – THOMAS HARDY’S *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE* (SOME HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS ON TIME, HISTORY, AND HUMAN PERCEPTION)

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The present paper examines the presence of light as a narrative instrument in Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Return of the Native*. Attention is paid to how the author uses it uniquely and variously in order to develop plot. Some scientific definitions of phenomena are provided and a categorisation of the uses of light is made, the focus being mainly on the revelatory function of light. The employed critical perspectives are founded on phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Key words: Thomas Hardy, light, picture, narrative

The following paper is a fragment from a more comprehensive undertaking that investigates *Historicity and Fictionality* in Thomas Hardy’s novels. The focus of this discussion rests on the presence and meaning of light in what is agreed to be his first more mature work (Eakins 1960: 44) – *The Return of the Native*. There exist other analyses examining the use of light such as Vivian Greenhill’s *Impressions of Wessex: Light, Perspectives and Landscape in Six Hardy Novels* but they dwell on its metaphorical meanings. While light certainly has figurative manifestations, the present paper aims to prove that it is a significant plot instrument. It is mentioned on nearly every page which requires a provisional categorisation of the presence of light. The main categories we could describe are the following – light as an instrument that reveals or fails to reveal information (such as people’s faces and what they signify); light as a beacon (something that orients) and motivator of decisions whose appropriateness depends on the available clarity and the point of view of the receptor; and light as an enabler of sight and the processes of perception, understanding, and memory. The discussion employs ideas ranging between physics and literary theory, philosophy and critical studies of the

specific subject matter, namely: Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton and Wolfgang Iser, Paul Ricoeur, and Tsocho Boyadzhiev.

Before embarking on the journey of literary analysis, some initial clarifications as to the physical nature of light must be made. In Applebaum's *Encyclopedia of the Scientific Revolution*, one finds several definitions among which Aristotle's: "light is the instantaneous actualization of the transparency of the medium between observer and object. This actualization enables the colors of the object... to be transferred through the medium", while Descartes saw it as "not a motion of matter but a tendency to motion transmitted instantaneously through a medium of subtle matter" (Applebaum 2000: 569). Einstein, in *The Meaning of Relativity*, used light as an instrument in the difficult task of defining time as "it is advantageous... for the theory, to choose only those processes concerning which we know something certain" (Einstein 2003: 28). From these, one could conclude that light can be associated with transfer, motion, and may be considered a reliable point of reference for time counting. Also important, however, is how light is received. In Sir Isaac Newton's words, when we look at an object:

... the Light which comes from the several Points of the Object is so refracted... as to converge and meet again at so many Points in the bottom of the Eye, and there to paint the Picture of the Object upon that skin... with which the bottom of the Eye is covered... And these Pictures propagated by Motion along the Fibres of the Optick Nerves into the Brain, are the cause of Vision. For accordingly as these Pictures are perfect or imperfect, the Object is seen perfectly or imperfectly.

(Newton 1704: 10)

In addition to suggesting that there might be some idiosyncrasies of sight – a degree of subjectivity in people's perception of the world, this explanation is also important as it remarks that the act of seeing results in a picture with which our brain works as it pertains to Hardy's extensive use of descriptions of scenes as pictures, which is discussed in the second half of this paper.

Now that we have reviewed what light can be thought to be and how it is received, we can approach its uses in *The Return of the Native*. The novel opens with a detailed account of the arena that Egdon Heath is. Its landscape is central to the plot – "Practically all the incidents take place on Egdon" (Lea 1977: 70) – and it is understandable because, as some suggest, in this novel "Hardy gives the clearest exposition of the thread running through all his Wessex novels, of Man as part of a landscape" (Enstice 1986: 82). This is followed by an introduction of characters against the background of a vast scene, and it is in the third chapter that light's

presence is accentuated. It is the beginning of November and the heath dwellers are lighting customary bonfires:

Red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round... and as the hour may be told on a clock-face when the figures themselves are invisible, so did the men recognise the locality of each fire by its angle and direction, though nothing of the scenery could be viewed. The first tall flame from Rainbarrow sprang into the sky... It showed the barrow to be the segment of a globe, as perfect as on the day when it was thrown up... Not a plough had ever disturbed a grain of that stubborn soil. In the heath's barrenness to the farmer lay its fertility to the historian.

(Hardy 2000: 14)

On one hand, firelight is received intelligently, and it indicates distance and direction. On the other hand, it makes visible and possible to comprehend the fact that the site of the particular bonfire is one of historical significance and that its history has been recorded and preserved for interpretation. It is worth mentioning that history appears to be something Hardy was interested in – the narrators of some of his earlier works label themselves as biographers or reporters, and while there is no such mention, the word 'observer' is frequently used in *The Return of the Native*. Considering the context of this novel, the attention to observability speaks of a desire to record what is observed which results in a similar type of narrator.

In other words, light creates points of reference for orientation and establishes a connection to history. It may be said that this process of gradual revealing is an act of construction of the lit objects in the minds of those who are direct witnesses and in the imagination of readers. This ratiocination is inspired by Ricoeur's discussion of Bergson in which we read "By constructing a determined space, I am conscious of the successive character of the activity of understanding... Time and space mutually generate one another in the work of the synthetic imagination" (Ricoeur 1990: 55). The spatial dimension could be related to the revelatory or beacon function of light in the quoted fragment – the successive appearance of bonfires creates a temporary topography affording a sense of direction. This is also another occasion of light intertwining with time. It could be also connected to the insignia Eustacia, a central character, engages with – an hourglass and a telescope. But these can be discussed in a future commentary. The account continues:

It seemed as if the bonfire-makers were standing in some radiant upper storey of the world... the whole black phenomenon beneath represented Limbo as viewed from the brink by the sublime Florentine in his vision.

[...] It was as if these men and boys had suddenly dived into past ages, and fetched therefrom an hour and deed which had before been familiar with this spot... Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.

(Hardy 2000: 14-15)

In addition to the undated barrow, there is an evocation of the Late Middle Ages thanks to Dante, the times of Druids, Saxons, and how their tradition draws on the basis of this custom and not the more modern event of the Gunpowder Plot. Enstice sees in this event “the same curious order that encompasses Man and Nature in all time, past, present and future... brought to the apparently wild and unencompassable heath” (Enstice 1986: 84) while others describe the place in terms of its changeless character remarking that “Egdon’s massive immobility symbolizes the timelessness in the powerful sweep of Nature herself” (Collins 1968: 45). The production of these fires then not only defines the landscape but also revives history by repeating old ceremonies and in this way the tradition is preserved for those to come. Thus, the present for this community can be defined in Husserl’s words as “a continuity, and one constantly expanding, a continuity of pasts” (Husserl in Ricoeur 1990: 30). Such a compression of time is not uncommon for Hardy – in his *A Pair of Blue Eyes* a similar account is found in the episode of Knight’s hanging off a cliff during which he contemplates a fossil which causes his thoughts to roam back through various epochs of history against whose background human life looks petty (Hardy 2009: 200-201). The idea of a landscape recording parts of human history in a condensed form seems to be also inherent to some of his poems – where some researchers suggest that Hardy sees “the countryside as a manuscript of man’s past” where “the palimpsest essence of nature (in geological terms)” and “the palimpsest nature of history (in anthropological terms)” are “intertwined in an endless process of redefinition, of re-interpretation” (Rowland 2014: 181). What the following lines disclose is the immemorial purpose of the custom:

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light.

(Hardy 2000: 15)

It seems that these last words could have motivated Kramer’s statement that “The opening of *The Return of the Native* (1878) presents the Genesis of

the Wessex novels” (Kramer 1990: 22). Poetically said, the heathmen rage against the dying of the light that happens every year with the advent of winter. In other words, light or its absence is in accordance with the change of times and seasons, and it determines human history. The preservation of this tradition also shows that these people have changed slightly over time. What is witnessed could fit in Tsocho Boyadzhiev’s definition of a “peculiar night”¹. A peculiar night has a characteristic feature which could be “an event from sacred history or from the community’s life bearing a paradigmatic meaning and recurrent – in a symbolical and liturgical fashion – in the same time slot year after year” (Boyadzhiev 2011: 78)². Boyadzhiev also comments on certain peculiar nights such as the one of the spring equinox and how their meanings can be reinterpreted on the basis of their peculiarity – in this case using a religious approach (Ibid 85). He calls this process a “translation that historicises” – the redefining of the purely natural meanings of this night into such that express a deeper and more sacred meaning³. In this case, the annual change of Earth’s position resulting in a gradual shortening of days – a natural phenomenon whose occurrence indicates the fulfilment of yet another cycle in history – has received meanings that people from various epochs seem to share in a ritual. So, the changing availability of natural light marks the passing of times and these crafted bonfires show a society’s response, its reception of history manifested in a ritual. It seems then that natural light was used as a clock before Einstein decided to employ it as a scientific point of reference for the reading of time while the heathmen’s reaction embodies the mentioned type of translation in that the members of a community have redefined the habit of nature associating autumn and winter nights with sinister realms and forces. In other words, light is an instrument of both historicity and fictionality – it facilitates the pinpointing of history in that it marks the passing of a cycle and the manifestation of how people have received, processed, and reacted to a historical phenomenon. The latter half of this statement has been influenced by Wolfgang Iser’s discussion of the acts of fictionalizing – selection, combination, and self-disclosure (Iser 1983: 20). Of course, Iser discusses them as operations manifested in a literary text but a literary text is a kind of a record just as a community’s tradition is a record

¹ Quotes from non-English critiques appear in my translation henceforth.

² „... събитие от свещената история или от живота на общността, имащо парадигмално значение и преповтарящо се – символно-литургично – в същия времеви отрязък година след година“ (Бояджиев 2011: 78).

³ „Този ‘историзираш’ превод обръща чисто натуралните значения на равноденствената нощ в изразяващи един по-дълбок и по-съкровен смисъл“ (Бояджиев 2011: 85).

whose signs are not words but certain practices. The selected here is a natural phenomenon, it is combined to the people's understanding of it, and the disclosure is part of their awareness that this is only a 'customary deed', a tradition (Hardy 2000: 280).

This night is the one of the 5th of November and its importance as a temporal pivot has some private dimensions in addition to those of social tradition. Ken Ireland reminds us that:

Egdon on the 5th of November also marks the first anniversary of Eustacia's luring Wildeve to her bonfire (a year before the novel opens), thereby establishing a cyclical pattern which recurs later, and exemplifying Bakhtin's concept of chronotope (the fusion of temporal and spatial indices into a single concrete whole).

(Ireland 2014: 72)

And it is also on the same day that a year later Wildeve is beguiled into thinking that Eustacia is calling him again with her bonfire that is actually the work of her servant who was trying to cheer her up (Hardy 2000: 380-383). This misunderstanding in Wildeve's reception of the light signal leads to a chain of tragic events concluding with Eustacia's death. So, in addition to signifying the passing of time – a feature common to the fires in question – the one in front of Eustacia's house has grown to have new layers of meaning for her and Wildeve. It is also curious to mention that similar manifestations of cyclicity are present in Hardy's poetry – as one researcher of his poems remarks, his 'preoccupation' with themes such as 'death and incompleteness' is manifested in many pieces 'dealing with seasonal beginnings, endings...', most recurrent being 'autumnal departures' which signifies 'temporality, finality and indifference' (Rowland 2014: 227).

Another aspect of light's importance to the plot lies in that it is the instrument that makes possible the existence of what could be taken as Hardy's narrative building blocks – the detailed descriptions of scenes and characters. This also concerns the revelatory category. While some initial reviewers of *The Return of the Native* "criticized the theatricality of the scene-painting" (Millgate 2006: 184), others hold that a particular degree of "the essential energy of a Hardy novel is to be found in the descriptive detail, especially in his depiction of landscape" (Irwin 2000: 143). Our paper acknowledges the latter to be a particularly valid point. The high descriptive detail in the portrayal of not only landscapes but also characters involves intense observation on the part of the creator of this literary world and cannot go unnoticed by the reader. It can be connected to Goethe's remark that:

Every act of looking turns into observation, every act of observation into reflection, every act of reflection into the making of associations; thus, it is evident that we theorize every time we look carefully at the world.

(Goethe 1988: 159)

And among the major premises for these acts is the availability of ample lighting. We could consider an example that will expand our understanding of the entire scene and relate to one of the previously listed categories:

The brilliant lights and sooty shades which struggled upon the skin and clothes of the persons standing round caused their lineaments and general contours to be drawn with Dureresque vigour and dash. Yet the permanent moral expression of each face it was impossible to discover... All was unstable... Those whom nature had depicted as merely quaint became grotesque, the grotesque became preternatural; for all was in extremity.

(Hardy 2000: 15)

The meagre clarity of vision resulting from unstable or insufficient lighting conveyed in this episode, not without the help of a somewhat ekphrastic reference to Durer, could be related to an instrumental function of light – one in which it reveals, or in this case fails to reveal entirely, a person's countenance.

The above is important because Hardy puts an emphasis on the human face throughout many of his works – one example being the opening of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in which Elfride's countenance is described in detail and some of its expressive features are compared to those of portrayed characters by painters such as Rubens and Correggio (Hardy 2009: 7). To him, a face is a manifestation of a character's personality as some remark (Witt 2006: 61) and as he himself confesses in his work. In *The Return of the Native*, there are clues pointing to this in the fragment above commenting on the impossibility of "the permanent moral expression of each face" to be read in this light – we shall therefore look at three other examples related to the three major characters in the novel – Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, and Egdon Heath. Fairly early in the story, the narrator elaborates on his philosophy:

In respect of character a face may make certain admissions by its outline; but it fully confesses only in its changes. So much is this the case that what is called the play of the features often helped more in understanding a man or woman than the earnest labours of all the other members together. Thus the night revealed little of her whose form it was embracing, for the mobile parts of her countenance could not be seen.

(Hardy 2000: 46)

This explanation accompanying the mysterious introduction of Eustacia Vye shows how illumination plays a role not only in seeing an object but also in reading its qualities which leads to an understanding of the nature of what is seen. This introduction also foreshadows the failure of most dwellers to comprehend Eustacia's character who is ostracized and thought a witch. Our understanding is expanded with the account of Clym Yeobright's portrait:

In Clym Yeobright's face could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future... The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but his face as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded. His features were attractive in the light of symbols, as sounds intrinsically common become attractive in language, and as shapes intrinsically simple become interesting in writing.

(Hardy 2000: 141)

Thus, in characters' faces, there seems to exist a relationship between visibility and readability. One follows the other, the former being a matter of physics and the latter being a matter of human experience in terms of experiences that have led to the formation of particular features, and experience as regards the reading of these features.

The description of Egdon Heath's face in chapter one is reminiscent of other books by Hardy in which inanimate objects of nature are said to have a presence of their own or a countenance as is the case with the cliff in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (Hardy 2009: 192, 199). But, more importantly, it shows that an amendment to our logic is necessary. The text reads:

The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread.

In fact, precisely at this transitional point... the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste began, and nobody could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at such a time. It could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen, its complete effect and explanation lying in this and the succeeding hours before the next dawn: then, and only then, did it tell its true tale.

(Hardy 2000: 5)

So, ample lighting is not the most accurate term we should use since the face of the heath speaks when illumination is subdued enough. In other words, the modulation of light is the key that unlocks the readability of the true nature of things. The fact that this balance is not there only for aesthetic

reasons has been noted in a way by Arlene Jackson who believes that in addition to “an inherent visual interest, the contrast between light and darkness increases the sense of drama and also organizes the scene's visual information” (Jackson 1982: 94). As we know, Hardy's plots are often tragic and it seems logical to use a dim landscape as the stage for his drama. In a discussion of some characters from this novel, Peter Rothermel suggests that “In a good number of Hardy's major novels an overbalance of dark tones, of sombre hues seems to prevail, and these are closely linked to the fate of the protagonist” (Rothermel 1996: 170) which seems pertinent and also has more to do with the symbolic nature of light. Here, however, we are not interested that much in symbols – our focus is instead on how instrumental to the plot light is in its literal meaning. Paul Ricoeur touches upon the question of readability and visibility as he states that “it is with the portrait of characters in narratives, whether they be stories from everyday life, narrative fictions, or historical fictions, that visibility decisively carries the day over readability... the characters in a narrative are emplotted along with the events that, taken together, make up the story told. With the portrait... the pairing of readability and visibility stands out most clearly” (Ricoeur 2006: 262). It must be clarified that visibility, associated with a picture, in his mind, is related to the descriptive stasis, whereas readability – to the properly narrative advance. Hardy's work appears to share this understanding but visibility and readability seem to be fused in a successive way whereas, it would seem, Ricoeur gives favour to one of the elements one. In other words, characters' portraits, made possible by a certain modulation of light, play an important role in the successful telling of a story.

Considering the categories of light's presence and its instrumentality to the plot, light could be viewed as an element that unites all novels by Hardy. Our discussion of *The Return of the Native* can be continued by an examination of the other provisional categories and establishing a more comprehensive system that exceeds the limits of this novel. Additionally, the layering of history can be viewed through the lens of Koselleck's ideas of cultural layering expressed in *Sediments of Time*. Alternatively, one could delve deeper into the question of what motivated Hardy to be so focused on visual details carrying precious narrative information.

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