ПЛОВДИВСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПАИСИЙ ХИЛЕНДАРСКИ“ – БЪЛГАРИЯ
НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ, ТОМ 51, КН. 1, СБ. В, 2013 – ФИЛОЛОГИЯ,
PAISII HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV – BULGARIA
RESEARCH PAPERS, VOL. 51, BOOK 1, PART C, 2013 – LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

LACUNAE: ON THOMAS HARDY'S *HUMAN SHOWS, FAR PHANTASIES, SONGS AND TRIFLES* (1925)

Yana Rowland
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

In Hardy's *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs and Trifles* (1925) one stumbles upon a surprising variety of lack, expressed through the expiration of beloved people, the departure of sustainable hopes for a more humane future, the unsuccessful attempts to revise life, the fleetingness of natural beauty, as well as through all sorts of metaphorically indicated interruptions, omissions, fragmentation and anonymity (suggested in the titles of poems). The absence of a steady point of reference (seen in the persistent images of incompletion) speaks of an irreparable existential chasm and of the disintegration of the lyrical self's internal autonomy both of which have ontological validity in the perception of the modern individual – an alien survivor amidst history as a caricature of seriousness and order, a disfigured mosaic of interchangeable mocked reveries about achievability of meaning.

Key words: lack, anonymity, interchangeability, Thomas Hardy, meaning, past, history, ontology

"Is life a pseudo-concept? Don't I have to choose, in extreme situations, between my life on the one hand and my friends, truth, my faith on the other? To be exact, if there are moments when my life appears to me united into one all-embracing value, it is not from the interior of indefinite, chequered, affective experience, but from the exterior, from the viewpoint of death. It is death which gives life its unity, in the sense that only a catastrophic situation, forcing me to choose between my life and those of my friends, has the power of posing the question of my existence. The possibility of this simple event, my death, my dying, suddenly unites all that I am as body in one equally simple embrace. From dying, life receives all the simplicity, if not as an act I posit, then at least as a state of bodily existence itself" (Ricoeur 1966: 121).

Experiential traces, remnants, twists and discrepancies of all sorts always appealed to Hardy more than actual observable happenings, normality, predictability or propriety of morals. Abnormality, mimicry, secrecy, faultiness, mockery, unimportance, lunacy and ostensibly gobbledygook discursiveness – these features appear to have left a titular imprint on *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs, and Trifles* (1925) – Hardy's last complete collection of poems which, traditionally, also contains verses wrought out of, or leading to, events, much earlier than the time of their actual publication.[1] Here are titles suggesting lack, rifts of expectations, fragmentariness, irreversibility, finality, anonymity and underestimation. *Waiting Both; In a Former Resort after Many Years; The Monument-Maker; Last Week in October; Come Not, Yet Come; The Later Autumn; In St. Paul's A While Ago; A Last Journey; When Dead; Sine Prole; Ten Years Since; The Graveyard of Dead Creeds; A Night of Questionings; Life and Death at Sunrise; The Frozen Greenhouse; Two Lips; Plena Timoris; The Last Leaf; A Second Attempt; "Freed the Fret of Thinking"; The Mock Wife; Last Look Round St. Martin's Fair; The Aërolite; The Fading Rose; "What's There to Tell"; Farmer Dunman's Funeral; On the Portrait of a Woman About to Be Hanged; "Not Only I"; A Poor Man and a Lady; The Echo-Leaf Answers; Inscriptions for a Peal of Eight Bells; A Refusal; "Known Had I"; The Sundial on a Wet Day; Her Haunting-Ground; The Forbidden Banns; On Martock Moor; That Moment; "Nothing Matters Much"; "Why She Moved House"; A Leaving; Song to an Old Burden; "Why Do I"*. The poems deal profusely with the expiration of beloved people, the departure of sustainable hopes, the unsuccessful attempts to revise life, the fleetingness of natural beauty; they offer general, abstract or precise manifestations of interruptions, omissions, mortal errors, death and anonymity. The absence of a singularly definable steady point of reference (seen in the persistent images of incompletion and imperfection) speaks of an irreparable existential chasm and of the disintegration of the lyrical self's internal autonomy, both of which have ontological validity in the perception of the modern individual – an alien survivor amidst history as a caricature of seriousness and order, a disfigured mosaic of interchangeable mocked reveries about achievability of meaning.

[1] See, for instance: *Coming Up Oxford Street: Evening (1872), Last Love-Word, The Prospect (1912), When Oats Were Reaped (1913), "She opened the door" (1913), Retty's Phases (1868), A Beauty's Soliloquy During Her Honeymoon (1892), The Monument-Maker (1916), Inscriptions for a Peal of Eight Bells, The Sea Fight (31 May, 1916), Discouragement (1863 – 67).*

* * *

Lunacy, Rifts, Lack of Perspective

As ever, the "tireless poetic experimenter"[2] yields a myriad of impressions which disclose the travail of memorializing the unjust distribution of pain and pleasure, of dignity and infamy, of fame and nothingness, of survival and oblivion – all of which regulated through inveterate death. Hardy remembered, for instance, how, as a boy, he had witnessed his father killing a bird idly with a stone on a half-frozen field: young Thomas picked up the starved creature and had it ingrained in his memory forever (Irwin, ed. 2007: 456). On another occasion, he went on hands and knees, pretending to eat grass, to examine the reaction of sheep around (ibid.). Similarly, Hardy's lyrical speakers demonstrate an excessive degree of contemplativeness, a worrying readiness to bear pain and an indicative willingness to merge with external reality, whilst affirming the necessity of codifying, canonizing and cherishing the sheer absurdities of existing. Lunacy and malady denote a lack of chances for progression, for escape from usualness and for achieving liberation from society's mechanical categorization of extraordinariness as redundant, ill, threatening or sick. This collection of Hardy's abounds in sick scenes that signal a community's denial of the necessity to accept life as a variorum, as being in heteronomy, in dialogue with one another – something which the poet's perspectivism and impressionistic relativism of description traditionally explicate. In *A Bird-Scene at a Rural Dwelling* there is an account of birds' life from the point of view of an inmate – a prisoner or a dweller of a lunatic asylum – in parallel and contrastively: his routine is stagnant, is one behind bars, their song is an unhindered sweet living whistle; the "*clock within goes five*" (measuring internalized routine), the birds outside spontaneously "*retire discreetly*" as the "*inmate stirs*"; he comes fully forth yet "*they seek the garden,/ And call from the lofty costard, as pleading pardon/ For shouting so near before/ In their joy at being alive*" (ll. 7-10). As the abnormal/human comes forth, wildlife withdraws giving in to fear, even though the birds' chirrup is said to have been resounding for "*a hundred summers*" (l. 13). This also suggests the age of this institution which seems to function hereby as a screen between two worlds where freedom and imprisonment are above all frames of mind and self-perception rather than judicially endorsed states of existence.

[2] Michael Irwin estimates some "eight hundred different metrical forms in the one thousand and ninety-three poems" that Hardy wrote, being fully "aware of the effects possibly achieved by varied lineation and the general distribution of the printed poem across the white of a page" (Irwin, ed.2007: XXIV).

The ancient faith of oneness, of communion with nature in the vast sense of the word, of intuitive safekeeping of universal harmony has now been swapped for the "*steady stress/ Of Reason's movement, making meaningless/ The coded creeds of old-time godliness*" (*A Cathedral Façade at Midnight*, ll. 19-21). Houses look "*blistered by a curse*": inhabited still by the presence of a woman who met a man, seduced him, then slighted him, buried him (much to the community's discontent), and she now "*gods him*", building a temple to ease her guilty conscience and "*scalding fires*" within (*Every Artemisia*, ll. 15, 17, 24, 27-28, 31-35). The woman still lives but is eaten up internally by a sense of guilt: that she ruined her beloved's life. In her remembrances there is both satisfaction and denial: she dwells within the heterogeneity of pain and pleasure – a phenomenon so typical for Hardy's vociferously iconoclastic survivor-commentators of the discordant values of being one amidst the many (Cf. Ricoeur 1966: 105 – 06). Rather than lack, this woman senses some threat – the threat of the man whom she loved, ruined, outlived, but who still occupies a superior position and on whom she therefore depends even after he has departed.

* * *

Blankness, Oblivion

Surviving in Hardy means hanging above an abyss of indefiniteness as to your own place in this universe where illness is almost a customary state of mind and where "optimists" as he used to say, would "blind the eyes to the real malady, and use empirical panaceas to suppress the symptoms" (Hardy 2007: 393). The symptom in this case, however, is the Other inside me, the one whom I remember, to whom I am no different, whom I have wronged and on whom I depend as he feeds my memory, therefore my conscience, therefore my own Self which begins to take shape as that Other becomes no more. This disproportion of being and of becoming through outliving and missing is a seminal element in Hardy's poetic world. The disease develops as early as one's birth as one starts exercising one's memory – a factor of cognitive growth and a pre-requisite for, as well as a result of, one's linguistic-experiential eventness. A poem which almost certainly relates to Hardy's first wife, Emma, presents a wayward survivor who "*chisels her monument*" to his "*mind's content*" only to be rebuffed by his beloved's ghost which pronounces of this very monument:

"It spells not me!" […]
"Tells nothing about my beauty, wit or gay time
With all those, quick and dead,
[…]
Including you, who carve there your devotion;
But you felt none, my dear!"

The lyrical speaker forces a tear, seeing he "*had not been known by her, / And never prized!*" The poem is *The Monument-Maker* (1916, ll. 1-2, 10-12, 15-16) – composed four years after his first wife's death. It "boasts" a superficial, self-centered heir to the memory of a departed beloved now haunting him as the arrogantly perceptive and intelligent ghost which "*scorns*" the failure of his memory, his pretence in mourning out of decorum and his obsession with external shapes of mere aesthetic value, such as the lavishly and finely shaped marble tombstone, apparently a long-last project of general pragmatic social merit.

Hardy's lyrical survivors come to regret the common social state of oblivion whilst also appreciating the lot of being temporally bound, as in "*Let me believe*" (ll. 9 – 16):

And I will fondly ponder
Till I lie
Earthed up with other yonder
Past a sigh,
That you may name at stray times
With regret
One whom ***through green and gray times***
You forget!

Compared to the previous quote, this one illustrates how the position of a triumphantly surviving "monument-maker" is interchangeable with that of a wise and mellow dead person – forgiver of humanity's neglect of the past, of history, and of truth. Indicatively enough, the course of being is seen to stretch between "*green and gray times*" (my bold type in the poem cited above) – between verdant nature/youth/emergences/life/grass, on the one hand, and culture/old age/disappearances/death/the tombstone, on the other. Intelligence and associative memory declare that both these ends are in fact beginnings – "the green" is reproducible and so is "the grey" – they happen, spring up and decline, within each single lifetime. In the poem *In St. Paul's A While Ago* the world of living people rises as the "daemonian din outside,/" where there looms St. Paul's, with its "*yawning dome and nave*" – a symbol of men's

entropy and narrow-mindedness which declare St. Paul "*that strange Jew*", "*an epilept enthusiast*" (ll. 10, 13, 21, 38). It says that instead of fostering reverence for the apostle, people built "*the encircling mart*" which "*assumed his name, of him no part*": i.e. commerce comes to oust religion as a practically more feasible and profitable philosophy of survival. If we were to approach Hardy's attitude to life through Max Scheler's philosophical anthropology and metaphysics, then we may be able to ascertain how the poet's mind, mature and nearing its experiential culmination, displays a closer approximation to an instinctive perception of extrinsic reality whereby "associative chance reactions" disproportionately outdo "the number of trials" to relate to otherness (Scheler 1976: 21, 25). Any encounter with a topical monument of historical worth – natural or human-made – stimulates reflection, and in this case reflection about transitoriness and communal disunion. Man is infinitesimally capable of choosing, of intelligibly interpreting: as a bearer of spirit, the human being is capable of reversing "dynamically and in principle, its relationship both to external reality and to itself" in that he "exhibits, to an unlimited degree, behaviour which is open to the world"; this means that, unlike the animal, man can "transform the environment into an object", can "perform the peculiar act of detachment and distance" thus making the environment "a symbol of the world" (Scheler 1976: 35 – 39). In Hardy, each contact with the outside stirs the viewer's conscience and makes him objectify his own psychology and bodily functions. Quite apparently, and sadly enough, man's mind is "*fretted*" by "*thinking/ On mortality*" where, and each single occasion of experiencing loss both whets and aggravates his self-certainty. Hardy's lyrical speaker wishes to be:

Loosed from wrings of reason,
We might blow like flowers,
Sense of Time-wrought treason
Would not then be ours
In and out of season;
Loosed from wrings of reason
We should laud the Powers!

These lines, taken from the poem "*Freed the Fret of Thinking*" (ll. 6-7, 51-21) are suggestive of Hardy's conviction in that lower forms of existence – those which are unable to objectify the world – lead a happier life and hold steadier hopes for survival than man whose problem is, as Scheler would put it, his "third-time givenness to himself" – in biological being, in self-consciousness and in the capacity of objectifying his own psychic and motor

states and systematic reactions (Cf. Scheler 1976: 42).[3] A later poem called *A Wish for Unconsciousness* (one from *Winter Words*, 1928) expresses the poet's desire for a respite, away from the requirement and the inner urge to remember, to think, to judge, to reconcile contraries, and to respond – all of which can be defined as characteristics of human existence, of being amidst otherness and with the consciousness of temporality:

If I could but abide
As a ***tablet*** *on a wall,*
Or a ***hillock*** *daisy-pied,*
Or a ***picture*** *in a hall,*
And as nothing else at all,
I should feel no doleful achings,
I should hear no ***judgment-call****,*
Have no evil dreams or wakings,
No uncouth or grisly ***care****;*
In a word, no ***cross to bear****.*

The words bold-typed may lead us to imagine a neutral being, a plain, two-dimensional existence where answerability and mental and spiritual motion become redundant: one which has been spared the need to recognize the superiority of others who exceed the self taken in isolation (Cf. Gadamer 1994a: 28). The curious thing about Hardy is that "many situations described in verse were not actual transcripts from the writer's personal experience" (Irwin, ed. 2007: 402), yet they became indistinguishably intermingled – via transformation of real/imaginary happenings – with the confessional, personalised, analytic voice of his lyrical speaker who conveyed to the reader a burdening sense of inbetweenness, of marginalisation in time, of history compressed and stored. With that came a sense of actualities which called for deciphering, for the critic's empathy and for filling in with meaning by way of interpretation.[4] Interpreted in hermeneutic terms, Hardy thus proves man's

[3] "Man alone – in so far as he is a person – is able to go beyond himself as an organism and to transform, from a centre beyond the spatiotemporal world, everything (himself included) into an object of knowledge. Thus man as a spiritual being is a being that surpasses his own self in the world. As such he is also capable of irony and humour which always indicate the transcendence of actual existence (Dasein)," (Scheler 1976: 46-47).

[4] Hardy displayed an arresting skill to remember and revive tragic incidents from a much earlier time, such as the story of a murder he knew of and related to Mr and Mrs John Galsworthy on 6th September 1927 – something that had happened eighty years earlier (Cf. Irwin, ed. 2007: 451).

non-solipsistic, communal, organic, being whose centre is indeed always the alter-ego. For him man abides in inter-subjectivity, in the "unstable tension between the relation of master and slave and the relation of communion" (Cf. Ricouer 1966: 128-29).

* * *

Rifts, Failure of Communication, Incompletion, Guilt

Human Shows is Hardy's lengthy regret over men's loss of their ability to communicate and to resolve problems of communication together. Togetherness is no longer a remarkable trait of communal existence. Drifting apart, failing to comprehend the Other, dwelling amidst parchments of conversation, abiding by uncertainties – those seem to be the obvious features of a maimed dialogue, of a crippled talk between humans. In fact, it is the very first poem in this collection – *Waiting Both* – that unambiguously states that it is almost easier to find common points between a common mortal and a star – as wide apart as they may seem – than to expect understanding between two inhabitants of the same species. Both man and the star build awareness of time and are able to measure their own position in space ("*Here I and you/ Stand, each in our degree*", ll. 2-3) whilst further in the poem it is suggested that "*change*" awaits both as they both rely on developing awareness of being temporally definable ("*I say: "For all I know,/ Wait, and let Time go by,/ Till my change come." – Just so,"/ The star says: "So mean I: –/ So mean I*", ll. 6-10).

In different exemplifications of the proposition *self-other* there can be identified rifts of sense, chasms between expectations and actuality. In *A Poor Man and a Lady*, for instance, the institutionalised expression of marriage is juxtaposed to the sincerity of belief in marriage as a deep emotional bond between two individuals on equal terms: whilst there is a real, legal husband coming up, there is the natural one, the one who has avowed himself as "husband". The lady and her beloved pledge themselves to each other within the sacrament of marriage "*in the sight of God*" (l. 2), without publicly announcing, or conventionally legalizing this act. For empirically minded Victorian society a promise proves a tool feebler than actual written evidence of a mutually convenient agreement between two parties even though in this case the dilemma is mostly ethical (to stay faithful to your love and thus to yourself, or to follow established norms and the expected contractors' aims in the union between the two families). Another poem, *The Echo-Leaf*, suggests, on the other hand, the transitoriness of human affection and the superficiality of human

aspirations by way of emphasizing brevity, predictability and earth-bound (chthonian) definability in the reflections of a leaf, allegorically referable to human life and justifiably exhibiting the common course of indifferent Nature who jests with, and throws about, living creatures:

How much shall I love her?
For life, or ***not long****?*
*"****Not long****."*

Alas! When forget her?
In years, or ***by June****?*
*"****By June****."*

And whom woo I after?
No one, or ***a throng****?*
*"****A throng****."*

Of these shall I wed one
Long hence, or ***quite soon****?*
*"****Quite soon****."*

And which will my bride be?
The right or ***the wrong****?*
*"****The wrong****."*

And my remedy – what kind?
Wealth-wove, or ***earth-hewn****?*
*"****Earth-hewn****."*

The reiterations in each stanza between the last phrase of the second line and the third line itself (in bold type above) denote the ephemeral value of what is said just as well as the ephemeral lastingness of sound which eventually dies away, though language be an epitome of actual bonding between human beings and ostensibly, therefore, of man's readiness to curb self-satisfaction and to open up to otherness. Examples of spontaneous goodness in Hardy are so rare as to almost seem an ideological fault in Nature's continuity where preservation of the species implies force, negligence and self-interest, rather than humanist exertions to apply trust, empathy and pardon as principles of communal being. In view of society's steady decline the poet wrote (in a letter to Mrs Arthur Henniker on 5th June 1919) that he thought that "people were less pitiless towards their fellow-creatures – human and animal – under the Roman

empire than they are now" (Hardy 2007: 399). Hardy's lament over the departure of innocence and benevolence can also be captured in the following quote from a note he wrote in June 1920. It reads: "disinterested kindness is less. The spontaneous goodwill that used to characterise manual workers seems to have departed. One day of late a railway porter said to a feeble old lady, a friend of ours, 'See to your luggage yourself' " (Hardy 2007: 416). Unfulfilled relationships and nameless "sylph-like" women haunt Hardy's poems and make both occasions of the poet's longing and the arbitrariness of feminine responses to them ephemera which can and should be dealt with (see esp. *Donaghadee*, ll. 24-28).

Cases of participation in calamities of major historical value can no longer be defined as communally appreciated: soldiering denotes singular survival, it is a way of getting by, rather than a defence of a human cause: "*He has fought and bled in civil wars/ Of no concern to him*" (*The Rover Come Home*, ll. 9-10). This threatens the relationship between mother and son (it could be assumed that the mother put trust in her soldier son as an advocate of a diligent cause). The mother dies, lonely and nameless, thus compromising the soldier's motivation for a return to the native spot and his possible desire to live on:

And now he's home. You look at him
As he talks by your fireside.
And what is written in his glance
Stressed by such foreign wear,
After such alien circumstance
What does his face declare?
His mother's; she who saw him not
After his starting year,
Who never left his native spot,
And lies in the churchyard near.

(Hardy, *The Rover Come Home,* ll. 15-24)

The event nearest in historical terms was certainly World War I, but Hardy's literary memory, where gaps, omissions and faults played the role of catalysts of meaning, might well have interwoven the cross-Atlantic context of American Civil-War unrest (1861-65) to emphasize the ostracism of modern man in geographically more holistic terms. Another event to look back on would have been The Crimean War (1853-56). Such an inter-cultural context of signification blurs the boundaries between foreign and own, binding modern individuals into a common fraternity of pointlessness, namelessness and companionable mediocrity which pleases and shocks one at

the same time. Knowledge in Hardy comes belatedly and occasions less felicity than ignorance which is normally an organic regulator of existence amidst the many whereby faithfulness and charity exist out of shame and often appear post-factum (see *"Known had I"*). The speaker is frequently also the perpetrator of a fault, or a crime, and the process of description of an event unfolds as a near actual happening which calls for judgement – a fact which proves the duality of interpreting reality and of existing. As Paul Ricoeur argues, every ostensibly neutral signification can be and in fact always is, "incorporated in acts of different quality" in man's (in)voluntary being part of a community (Cf. Ricoeur1966: 44 – 44). So that the final lines of Hardy's "*Known had I*" […] " *if I could only/ Have known what I know now*", ll. 15-16) make meaning (which comes as a regretful realization of what could and should have been done) be "at the same time called and held in suspension by its hypothetical modifier" – the wronged one, the one who is missing but is spoken of, the victim (ibid.). Knowing in Hardy is not tantamount to being able to change or manage, so that acts of physical and verbal being are never autonomous and never simply first completed and then analysed. Meaning for Hardy happened and grew all the time and gaps in history predominated and made the process of cognition the more challenging for surviving lyrical speakers and readers (see also *That Moment*).

Meaning – as an individual and communal property – is a desired, sought, and often forbidden, territory in Hardy who puts his lyrical personae through the existential mill of surviving amidst chunks of information and skeletons of previous occurrences. This is often presented in ballads based on some historical facts and figures, as for instance in *The Forbidden Banns: A Ballad of the Eighteen-Thirties*. The eventful atmosphere of this poem directs the reader at the issue of the tension between personal choice and parental authority: a young man marries despite his father's warning against the bride's erratic mental constitution. As he disregards the authoritative advice, the son becomes his father's involuntary executioner. Years after his father's demise, the mad woman brings two idiot-children, and the son realizes his mistake. In a frantic urge to make amends and honour his father, as well as obviously desiring to get rid of the chronic problem, he murders his own children:

> *What noise is that? One noise, and two*
> *Resound from a near gun.*
> *Two corpses found: and neighbours knew*
> *By whom the deed was done.*
>
> (Hardy, *The Forbidden Banns,* ll. 33-36)

The crime does not resolve the conflict, but, as ever in Hardy, it aggravates a given problem, builds meaning upon it and enriches, sinisterly enough, its generic validity and insolubility. Crime in Hardy confirms the interrelatedness of individuals as participants in some common project where they become more prominent as their guilt is pronounced. Such is the case with the woman who walks Martock Moor (a spot within the familiarity of Hardy's Southern England) unable to relate to her former lover (a poor man, killed, as that is suggested, by her legal husband) who appears to her now sporadically, as a ghost, a "fitful phantom" (*On Martock Moor*, 1899, l. 23). The crime in hand leads to the woman's loss of identity – in a way, she can be argued to replicate her former lover's spectral presence with which she would rather identify than with the barren existence she had as a legal wife. In both *The Forbidden Banns* and *On Martock Moor* we are able to observe how occasions of bereavement, moral degradation and social impoverishment – all occasions of existential lack and emotional vacuum – produce meaning more successfully and intensely than acts of felicitous completion of intentions. History accumulates in lapses and lashes – contrary to man's desire to arrive at an unambiguous, steady and wholesome definition of life (see also Hardy 2007: 395). It is amidst twists, nocturnal noises and spectral colours that meaning as motion – physical and historical – gets born. Proof of that is the poet's emphatic use of verbs denoting motion and mental activity ("*walk*", "*muse*", "*flounce*", "*haunt*", "*meet*"), as well as words denoting intensity of happening ("*deep-dyed husband*", "*gay gowns*", "*brighter barrenness*", the "*hiss* […] *Whore*", "*fitful phantom*") in *On Martock Moor*.

Hardy dwelt in a poetic world composed of reflections, silhouettes, copies, and presences which mimicked and complemented one another, a world where uniqueness was questionable and where one could wonder "*why [one] was born*" (see, for instance, *Coming Up Oxford Street: Evening,* as seen in 4th July, 1872, esp. ll. 1-4, 20). In this world effects were granted more prominence than causes and where one's actual physical presence often mattered more than one's descent which was found to be of little consequence (as is the case with the baby in *At a Pause in a Country Dance: Middle of Last Century*). This was a world where one could never be satisfied with oneself because of a constant demand of an Other who could complete, rescue and draw the Self back from the verge of an existential abyss where one stood at all times, like one were a semi-uprooted tree. The poem *At Shag's Heath* (the story going back to 1685) tells of loss and guilt. A slain lover ("*King Monmouth*" – the rebel Duke

who comes "*to claim his rule and rights*") – a "*rarest soul*" (l. 4) appears (half-ghost, half-man) at the window of his beloved whose husband ordered his death. On his way "*to drown*" he takes leave of his lady, declaring that "*sooner or later all must go*" (l. 44) and that he is afraid lest he should blood-stain the "*nighty-rail*" (l. 49-51): he departs, forbidding her to wear weeds. It is in the physicality of the final scene that the woman's lifetime begins to take mould and it is through her narrative of loss that we come to know her. Her consciousness gets compromised when it has to face a crime. *Being* is directly related to *doing*: the two form an indissoluble dichotomy. If we choose to eliminate a man who is in our way, we actually risk eliminating that who "certifies" our own Self, as Ricoeur argues:

> "Self-affirmation can then have the vainglorious overtone of self-satisfaction which calls on the other to attest and applaud: it is the other who certifies me as myself. [...] self-affirmation is a gesture of going out, of showing oneself to the fore and confronting oneself. [...] in waking up from anonymity I discover that I have no means of self-affirmation other than my acts themselves. "I" am only an aspect of my acts, the subject pole of my acts. I have no means of affirming myself on the fringes of my acts. This is what the feeling of responsibility reveals to me.
>
> Beside, it is after the fact, and in a situation of guilt, that reflection appears to itself as an articulation of a connection between the agent and the act which is more fundamental than all reflection. [...] the self is in its acts. [...] self-reference, whatever it may be, is not isolable from reference to the project, to whatever is represented, remembered, or rejoiced over. The self is not complete in itself. In particular it does not will itself in a void, but in its projects. I affirm myself in my acts. This is precisely what the feeling of responsibility teaches us: this action is myself" (Ricoeur 1966: 56-59).

In the light of the above reflections, acts of murder confirm and deny identities both ways: for the murderer/mourner/survivor, and for the victim/mourned-for/dead – as related to one another.

* * *

Ghostly Visitants from the Past

Hardy did care about the past – riddled with lacunae and incomplete as it felt. He held dear his own possessions. The desk in his study was left "without a mark or scratch upon it at the time of his death" (Irwin, ed. 2007: 434). He held that all was relative and because of that always near, always available, and the past presided over the present. On 10th June 1923

Hardy wrote: "Relativity. That things and events always were, are, and will be (e.g. Emma, Mother and Father are living still in the past)" (Hardy 2007: 430). And further, on 15th November 1923: "The change of persons on the stage is called a change of scene, there being no change of background" (ibid. 433). In hermeneutic terms, this perception belittled the present and made the past advantageous not only in its aesthetic value but also in its ethical worth which also worked towards enhancing the adequation of the presentation through speech to the presented thing (Cf. Gadamer 1994b: 36). A central image of methodological value seems to be that of the female ghost, most immediately related to the image of the departed Emma Hardy. The poems that discuss Emma exhibit much activeness and richness of imagery, they are never still-lives or closed books. She may be referred to as "*Jane*", still riding with him (as in *The Carrier,* ll. 5-7); her ghost might still be roaming the "*slates of greenish colour*" in a mining quarry fifty years after their first meeting (as in *Green Slates: Penpethy*, ll. 3-4, 9); she surfaces as "*the frigid face of the heath-hemmed pond*", or as "*the half-crowned moon*", or as a "whiff from the north with a husky croon" (as in *At Rushy Pond*, ll. 3-4). The poet may claim that "*her days dropped out of mine*" (*At Rushy Pond*, l. 24), but that yet again confirms her dominating position in the process of his self-identification and of his developing his ability of measuring and accounting for time. Emma kept revisiting Hardy and turned, eventually, into "*a book*", a text in itself, a palimpsest where one could read the life of human as well as natural being:

'Tis ten years since
I saw her on the stairs,
Heard her in house-affairs,
And listened to her cares;
And the trees are ten feet taller,
And the sunny spaces smaller
Whose bloomage would enthral her;
And the piano wires are rustier,
The smell of bindings mustier,
And lofts and lumber dustier
Than when, with casual look
And ear, light note I took
Of what shut like a book
Those ten years since!

(Hardy, *Ten Years Since,* Nov. 1922)

Emma turned into a conceptual tool for tracking back the roots of the poet's own presence, of his identity and of knowledge in familial terms; she became a method for the investigation of the past. To sum up in Gadamer's words:

> "The ideal of knowledge that is determined through the concept of method consists in pacing out a path of knowledge so consciously that it is always possible to retrace one's steps. *Methodos* means the path of repeated investigation [nachgehen]. Always to be able once again to go over the ground one has traversed, that is methodical […]" (Gadamer 1994b: 37).

Most probably, guilt and sincere affection competed in Hardy's maintaining the memory of Emma. It meant maintaining awareness of life which led back to the past as a vast expanse of clues to grasp the present which thus felt as if it were a draft constantly being written, cross-marked and expanded the further one interpreted the past. The past, too, would alter slightly with each glance back to it. Emma looms as an urge to linguistically capture life: she seems to work as a cause of, and result from, the poet's grammaticalization of the dichotomy space–time in ontological terms. In *The Frozen Greenhouse (St. Juliot)* the woman and her plants reciprocate as they suggest death and oblivion (on the survivor's part): "*The frost is fiercer/Than then to-day,/ As I pass the place/Of her once dismay,/ But the greenhouse stands/ Warm, tight, and gay,// While she who grieved/ At the sad lot/ Of her pretty plants– Cold, iced, forgot– Herself is colder,/ And knows it not*" (ll. 13-24). Emma's ghost encourages the poet to re-visit their places of erstwhile courtship, to travel, to know his peasant agricultural past better, in short to build a better cultural-geographical awareness of his native land. Logical therefore seems the constant reciprocal mixture of past, present and futurity. An imaginary contact with dead Emma simultaneously invokes her actual life, her final moments, as well as the long-last memory of her in feasible terms, as in *Two Lips*: "*I kissed them through the glass of her picture-frame:/ She did not know. //* […] *That I should kiss them in a shroud thereafter/ She did not know*" (ll. 3-4, 7-8). For the poet Emma's ghost seems to have been a regulator of the actual physical account of the day/night cycle of human being and activity which in metaphorical terms parallels man's perception of time in general (i.e. past–present–future). That explains Hardy's feeling that "futur**es**" (or time) "unfurl" – the plural form presupposes the variability, the interpretational ambiguity which characterizes man's existence as existence in heteronomy, i.e. in dialogue with an Other, greater than the Self (see esp. *In the Street: Song*, ll. 8-10, 13-15). It also takes us back to the image of presence

as an open scroll, a palimpsest, where things get constantly written and re-written, so that when Hardy was starting his romance with Florence Dugdale (the second Mrs Hardy), he felt he "*began again/ An old-time passion*": he fell in love again but whilst falling in love anew, he was also falling in love with Emma's ghost (see *A Second Attempt*, ll. 1-3, 22, 25-27). On the other hand, this occasion exacerbated the sense of finality, old age and irreversibility: "*But nothing backward climbs, /… There was Life – pale and hoar*" (ibid.). Every such moment of remembrance (as how, for instance, Emma stood beneath the birch-tree "*last July*") always also revives the poet's seasonally fed knowledge that he shall die: knowledge which is certain and which makes up for the seemingly equivocal and elliptical ending of *The Prospect*: "*… But well, well do I know/ Whither I would go*" (Dec. 1912, l.3, ll. 9-10; see also *Once at Swanage*). His knowledge of finality becomes literally and figuratively particularised through a female ghost's inexorable presence which still plays around every dear old spot and every sanctuary, though her tomb be "*slighted*" (*Her Haunting-Ground*, ll. 3, 8, 14-16). Emma becomes the kernel component of his vocal capacity, of his poetic intentionality which whistles the old tune of their one-time crippled, "*burdensome*" and "*cob-webbed*" yet still lasting romance in musical terms: "*The feet have left the wormholed flooring, / That danced to the ancient air, / The fiddler, all-ignoring, / Sleeps by the gray-grassed 'cello player: / Shall I then foot around, around, around, / As I once footed there! The voice is heard in the room no longer/* […] *now the dust-draped cobwebs stir: / Shall I then sing again, again, again, / As I once sang with her!* […] *O what's to me this tedious Maying, / What's to me this June? / O why should viols be playing/ To catch and reel and rigadoon? / Shall I sing, dance around, around, around, / When phantoms call the tune*" (*Song to an Old Burden*, ll. 1-7, 11-12, 19-24).

In discussing finality as a gap of ultimate meaning, Hardy manages to blend skilfully vagrancy, impersonality, particularity and a dog-like naivety, curiosity and brevity of attention:

> *Why she moved house, without a word,*
> *I cannot understand;*
> *She'd mirrors, flowers, she'd books and bird,*
> *And callers in a band.*
>
> *And where she is gone she gets no sun,*
> *No flowers, no book, no glass;*
> *Of callers I am the only one.*
> *And I but pause and pass.*
>
> *(*Hardy, *"Why She Moved House": The Dog Muses)*

The above poem signals survivors' incompetence about, and indifference to, the dead and to personal history, not least in relation to Hardy's earlier collection, *Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries* (1914), especially to the poem "*Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave*" and the actual *Satires of Circumstance in Fifteen Glimpses*. It also reminds us of Hardy's own famous dog Wessex (the name was evocative of Hardy's own background and literary beginnings) which had become Hardy's final long-last attachment to his native and intimate past in the period 1913–1926. Upon the dog's burial the poet made an entry in his diary – in a provocative present tense (on 28th December 1926): "28th December, Night – Wessex sleeps outside the house for the first time for thirteen years" (Hardy 2007: 446). Ironically enough, but in fact in unison with the poet's own wish, when Hardy passed away (on 11th January 1928), his heart was taken out of his body before it was cremated, and buried in the grave of his first wife, Emma, at Stinsford, amidst the tombs of his rural ancestors (Cf. Irwin, ed. 2007: 461-62). Emma had become Hardy's unresolved past which he eventually joined. And through Emma he donated himself to the literary world more than once: he multiplied his own spiritual entirety on every occasion of reviving her in a poem. Emma gradually became the poet's ideological counterpart, as she appeared in all his collections published after 1912: she urged the poet to reconsider and resolve the past. She was his double, his ghost, his "enemy" in the fruitful, creative sense of the word. In Derrida's phrasing: "Without an enemy, I go mad, I can no longer think, I become powerless to think myself, to pronounce '*cogito, ergo sum'*. For that I must have an evil genius, a *spiritus malignus*, a deceitful spirit" (Derrida 1997: 174-75, 181). In effect, Emma appears to have occupied a central place in Hardy's ambition to comprehend his own inner world and to confirm his own identity in feasible historical terms.

Emma's persistent presence in Hardy's poetry also suggests that he was seasonally, predictably, naturally incomplete. With each return to a spot of erstwhile mutual bliss he must have rediscovered that fact which therefore felt the more aggravating. His self-consciousness corroded as he turned his gaze further and further outside of himself, to the external world, to unfinished stories and haunting presences, thus, ironically, becoming more available to himself, more comprehensible and historically definable. Emma being dead, Hardy was unable to act wholesomely, to declare partiality and to demonstrate decision-making, to execute freedom. He lived verbally, but the experiences had gone and so his identity was compromised. He must have held Emma as a suspended historical reflection which suspended his own self-reflection. She turned into an ethical need which

revealed the poet's own constitution as well as that which was missing: herself. Without her Hardy proved a lacuna (Cf. Ricoeur 1966: 91, 127). At this point we are very much tempted to quote Ricoeur abundantly:

"We frequently imagine reflection as a turning about of consciousness which is at first outside of itself, then returns into itself and suspends its outward orientation. This forces us to regard consciousness turned towards the other as unconscious of itself and self-consciousness as corroding the consciousness which is directed towards something other than itself. Re-flection becomes retro-spection, disastrous for the pro-ject. […] It is the fate of self-consciousness to corrupt itself in all the cases in which it becomes pure observer. As it does so, it in fact suspends consciousness directed towards an action and towards the other in general. It is in contrast with this uprooted consciousness that consciousness, considered in its thrust towards the other, can be said to be forgotten by the self. Descartes calls this forward lap "generosity". […]As I am able to do I am also able to be. […] The more I commit myself and the more I am able to do, the more I am possible. I cannot affirm my potency for being unless I confirm it with acts. My possibility is in the first place my exercised ability. [...] words like thrust, pro-ject, or act, remain incomprehensible apart from an effort to correlate them with experienced history. […] To understand freedom is to understand precisely the *history* which we have held in suspension. But history of consciousness introduces hesitation and choice. […] The other is a thou: this is the affirmation which covertly animates the maxim of justice, [...]. The demand of justice thus consists in principle of a decentering of perspective by which the perspective of the other – the need, the claim, of the other – balances my perspective. […] In one aspect this decentering is inevitably an obligation: in practice my own life is *humbled* by [...] the value of the other. […] Obligation shows that the decentering of perspective which the other inaugurates is an asymmetry of value" (Ricoeur 1966: 60-61, 62, 64, 65, 126).

* * *

"Seasonal" Beginnings and Endings

Hardy's thematic preoccupation with death and incompletion is visible also in the many poems dealing with seasonal beginnings, endings, and repetition of similar scenes and problems. Amidst those, the persistence of autumnal departures signals temporality, finality and indifference most prominently. In *Last Week in October* (ll. 1 – 2, 4 – 8) the trees are said to be "undressing", as they are arbitrarily and hectically "*flung*" "*on the grey road*". The process is non-optional and hints at some violent victimization seen in a leaf falling prey to a spider whose "*web has caught*" it: it "*stays there dangling when the rest pass on; / Like a suspended criminal [...]/ [...] fearing such fate for himself anon*". The autumnal scenery yields pervasive images of decay which take us to

occurrences easily observable in general terms as well as to the theme of ageing and dying in a universe which feeds on waste and makes sure that it does not prize one element over another. Thus, in *The Later Autumn* we can observe a countryside spot which is gradually being abandoned by "*lovers* […] *under the bush*", then by "*bees…/ Tangling themselves in your hair as they rush/ On the line of your track*" (ll. 1-5). Decomposition, oblivion and anonymity lurk in the following lines (ibid. ll. 9-12, 17-20):

Toadsmeat is mangy, frosted and sere;
Apples in grass
Crunch as we pass,
And rot ere the men who make cider appear.
…
Spinning leaves join the remains shrunk and brown
Of last year's display
That lie wasting away,
On whose corpses they earlier as scorners gazed down

The lines quoted clearly hint at inconstancy and inter-changeability as permanent features of a natural cycle which also maps human history and human cognition: accumulation of detail leads to amassment of meaning whereby the proposition 'scorner'/observer/survivor-'scorned'/object/dead is being maintained as each living element/person goes through both stages, consecutively and unavoidably. In *Night-Time in Mid-Fall* Hardy implements the metaphor of '*migration*': "*The streams are muddy and swollen; eels migrate/ To a new abode*" (ll. 7-8). Migration here implies transition as well as devaluation of institutional control and destruction of human-made forms of belief in the face of the wild, the elemental where incompletion reigns: "*Church-timbers crack, and witches ride abroad*" (ibid. l. 12). Religion "cracks" – a victim of eroding natural materials (timber-wood). Occasions of human losses are less significant to Hardy than are occasions of consideration of those losses: at all times there are vivid prints of one's inability to alter nature's confirmed practice of clearing the old/unnecessary. Such evidences of the anthropological value of natural death can be found in: *Snow in the Suburbs, The Last Leaf, The Harbour Bridge, "Nothing Matters Much", A Spellbound Palace, A Light Snow-Fall After Frost, Music in a Snowy Street* etc.

* * *

Death imagined and experienced – the ultimate lacuna and a challenge to meaning

Imagining the unknown, the beyond, the ungraspable, which nonetheless leaves its physically and psychologically visible traces seems to have been Hardy's lifetime occupation. In that, death surfaces as the emblem of incomprehensibility: it is the utmost lacuna which, oxymoronically, contains and deprives, identifies and denies, is and is not. Life/the human mind is like a notebook, a palimpsest where, often, incomprehensible, illegible or incidental information gets written, where stray visitors traverse ravaging the place with mediocrity, exhausting its potential, at once depriving it of, and bestowing it with, an identity of its own. This is visible in the poem *In a Former Resort after Many Years*:[5]

Do I know these, slack-shaped and wan,
Whose substance, one time fresh and furrowless,
Is now a rag drawn over a skeleton,
As in El Greco's canvases? –
Whose cheeks have slipped down, lips become indrawn,
And statures shrunk to dwarfishness?

Do they know me, whose former mind
Was like an open plain where no foot falls,
But now is as a gallery portrait-lined,
And scored with necrologic scrawls,
Where feeble voices rise, once full-defined,
From underground in curious calls?

Amongst other things, the poem quoted above stresses the aesthetic significance of death, as well as the relativity of ethical value attributable to a mortal being whose presence and image gets validated by other people where the element of arbitrariness is extremely high. To Hardy art as a human product, as well as the appreciation of art by mortal beings, feature arbitrariness and temporariness. In *Human Shows* there are plenty of metaphors which suggest the disturbing continuity of men's failing

[5] Heraldries of death are common in Hardy's poetry. In *At a Fashionable Dinner* the lyrical speaker sees his own body lying in front of him amidst a din of voices at a banqueting party where his corpse is contrasted to his "*new bride*" (the age gap between Hardy and his second wife – 39 years his junior – might also have been implied here, even though the poem finishes with the address "*Lavine*" which takes us back to Emma Lavinia Gifford – the first Mrs Thomas Hardy; ll. 1, 11-12, 21-25).

attempts to grasp, to understand and appropriate, life which remains but an inexplicable puzzle resting on self-irony: "*Life's lottery*" (*Sine Prole*, l. 17), "*the graveyard of dead creeds*", "*old wastes of thought*", "*the melancholy marching of the years*" (*The Graveyard of Dead Creeds*, ll. 1-2, 16). In *A Spellbound Palace* we see an "*attenuate*" fountain passively lapsing "*over the world's clamorous clutch, /* […] *[laying] an insistent numbness on the place, like a cold hand's touch*" (ll. 15-17). The fountain's hand-touch – a gesture of reaching for something – speaks for itself in hinting at once achieving and failing, the serenity and the horror of death as a sort of finality–continuity that a human being shall never be able to soberly deal with.[6] Death is ingrained in every moment of contemplation and intimate happiness. Thus, in *Plena Timoris* two young lovers watch over the parapet-stone and become involuntary witnesses of the emergence of the dead body of another young woman, who, as a man incidentally informs them, drowned herself after her lover grew tired of her. The girl shudders as she realises that the place of her "*tryst*" is also the place of another human being's tragedy: her hand drops from her lover's as "*dim dreads of the future grew slowly to seize her*" (l. 19). Though elusive, the poem certainly implies the possibility of the male lover being the same who caused the tragedy in hand: an occasion that may well be repeated as he may also "*grow tired*" of his present-time mistress.[7]

Death deprives the dying individual of verifiable opportunities to be. At the same time, it concretizes – spatially and temporally – a lifetime, rendering it more available and usable. In *The Fading Rose* we come to mourn the death of a woman, whose only other mourner seems to have

[6] In *An Inquiry* we see Death "*crowned*" as "*King*" of the world and the power that allots Death such a place seems to have acted meaninglessly, for the mere fun of it, which is why it cannot be held liable. In September 1918, in a reply to a letter Hardy wrote: "[…] I do not think a world in which such fiendishness is possible to be worth the saving. Better let Western "civilization" perish, and the black and yellow races have a chance. However, as a meliorist (not a pessimist as they say) I think better of the world" (Hardy 2007: 397).

[7] The issue of the devaluation of human life is directly related to the motif of murder and revenge which crops up in a climate of disoriented and violent seekers for individual recognition. This could be seen in *The Mock Wife*. Here, a woman gets strangled and burnt on the scaffold because of her murdering her own husband whose dying wish, surprisingly enough, is to kiss his wife before he departs from this life (he is given that chance even though the woman brought to him in his last minutes is not actually his wife but a stranger resembling his wife in appearance only). Another poem which discusses a murderess – heiress of "*the Clytaemnestra spirit*" (l. 16) is *On the Portrait of a Woman about to be Hanged*, January 6th 1923.

been a rose – now fading and drooping, forgotten by her mistress. Ironically enough, the woman is also dead: the grave-digger knows her exact position for it was he who shaped her last abode. Soothing, allegorically, the dispirited rose, he says: " ' *She must get to you underground/ If any way at all be found, / For, clad in her beauty, marble's kin, / 'Tis there I have laid her and trod her in*' " (ll. 14 – 20). The two fates – the flower's and the woman's – replicate one another in a natural chain of loss and gain where memory serves to remind one of nature which accommodates and exceeds human-made "*text-writ stones*", amidst which the grave-digger dwells – a place where "*curious silence creeps*" (ll. 15-16). The image we finally get in this poem is of a place silent yet filled with anonymous activity and vigilance, a place where "*treading someone in*" the earth proves to define (in an ambiguous mixture of sacrilege and reverence), identify and personalize both that spot and its inhabitant – anew and indivisibly. Death as a moment of final identity-acquisition is also implied in the poem *Retty's Phases* ('From an old draft of 1868'), where a young unmarried woman dies, and as customary in many villages at the time (as the poet's own note accompanying the text explains), wedding peals are rung whose sound "*filled in her grave*" – defeating Death yet accepting his final decree over the maid whose bearers would have been unmarried men (Hardy 1995: 752). Thus, a lifetime gets validated – communally and biologically – death being the mediator. Both nature and human-made products are ambivalent in that they may at once confirm/register an occurrence and confuse/deprive it of meaning. A school-bell which gathers the pupils for the commencement of their class can coincide with the funeral peal of the church bell announcing death – both being occasions of personal and communal identification (as in *The High-School Lawn*, esp. ll. 14-18). In Hardy, the signs one encounters (hears, sees, reads, writes, and reproduces in various ways) in one's lifetime eventually all spring from, and lead to, the ultimate issue – that of being temporally and temporarily, and of being related to othernesses – concrete and abstract, natural and ideological, private and common, historic and a-historic. It is the same old tune – constantly learning and forgetting, affectivity and thought, experiencing and understanding, acquiring and losing, emerging and disappearing, external bodily objectification and self-conscious privacy of perception. Such poetry registers "a lacuna at the heart of existence", a lacuna whereby a specific other – even though he/she may not be actually given in the physical sense of the word is "a directed urge", an inevitable point of orientation (Cf. Ricoeur 1966: 86-89). Life, built on "assimilatory needs", demands an

external point of reference; yet the actual occasion of reaching such a point, sadly enough, does not make life a situation easier resolved because utter clarity and consistency of relationships amidst living creatures are an unachievable goal. This situation is ultimately complicated each time by the phenomenon of death which may be said to validate one's own life by making it immanently threatened and transcended by other values and other lifetimes (ibid. 113, 120-21).

* * *

Timing Being, Timing History

Timing being and history through not having, through lacking and mourning, through negotiating around, for, and despite, death; conceptualizing and aestheticizing the passage of time – these are cornerstones of Hardy's reflectivity. Death in Hardy guarantees some sameness, identity and continuity, unlike life, which implies by definition unsteadiness and change. An example of the latter is seen in *When Dead* (ll. 1-4, 9-12):

It will be much better when
I am under the bough;
I shall be more myself, dear, then,
Than I am now.
[…]
This fleeting life-brief blight
Will have gone past
When I ***resume my old and right***
Place in the Vast*.*

In the words bold-typed the notable thing is the wish to "*resume*" a place once held, as if the lyrical speaker has pre-cognition about it, and as if present life is a deviation away from it, a betrayal of truth which shall only be attained upon death whereby the unknown is granted the status of ultimate verity over the instability of the known. The present stands for indifference, negligence and oblivion, registered in the immediacy of attitudes to human tragedy (recent and privatized in a community's daily existence). In that sense, it makes no difference whether we speak about the tragedy of drowning, or being killed in war, or departing life "naturally" and peacefully, or being punished with a death sentence. As in *A Night of Questionings:* after each such occasion the dead still ask the living, epiphorically: "*What of the world now?*" Now that the blood of the ones killed in war has been mixed with the earth: *" 'What of the world*

now?' […] *You mauled these fields, do men/ Set them with dark-drawn breaths/* ***To knave their neighbours' deaths****/ In* ***periodic spasms****! / Yea, fooled by foul phantasms, / In a strange* ***cyclic throe****/ Backward to type they go: – / No more I know"* (ll. 59 – 68). The lines bold-typed suggest that history means "*mauling*" lives about – in rough regular spasms, quantifiable and registered cyclically on occasions of multiple loss which leave survivors aghast and bemused, rather than make them more knowledgeable and self-confident. History – as a record of the specific interchange between life and death – shall always remain a "*riddle immense*", as "*old cults*" rot and "*bulky codes*" get shot (as in *Zenophanes, The Monist of Colophon*, 1921, ll. 64-65). For, history is made by actual participants and bearers of events who, when gone, carry the key away with themselves, letting survivors search for its roots in dead remains, memorials and clues hidden amidst nature (this is hinted at in *Life and Death at Sunrise, Near Dogbury Gate*, 1867, where dead "*ninety-odd-year-old*" John Thinn and his grave function as a metonym for the French Revolution which this deceased man could once "*call up*", l. 24). Hardy's poetry is marked by his capacity for ideation: grasping essential modes and formal structures of the world through single cases, "independent of the number of observations and inductive inferences which belong to intelligence" (Scheler 1976: 50). Knowledge gained through such privately analysed insights acquires general validity of "the same essential nature, and for all possible subjects who think about the same case, quite independent of the accident of the senses and the manner and degree of their stimulation" (ibid.). In Hardy, it is of little consequence whether a lyrical speaker may be caught observing an anonymous grave of an old fool, or the well-known grave of Emma Hardy, or a pile of rotten autumnal leaves, or a dog buried outside the poet's home at Max Gate. They all meant – singly and commonly – life, death, Wessex, poetry and history. They were all, in Scheler's (Husserl's) idiom, cases of "'bracketing' the accidental coefficients of things in the world" in order to bring out their essences (ibid. 52). These phenomenological reductions, based on sensory experience, conveyed some quality of things (*Sosein*), but not, ultimately and unarguably, their true existence (*Dasein*). They showed the poet's attitude to the world, to the present, as given and needing explanation (ibid.). And it appears that Hardy's lyrical speakers stumble upon the fact that experience of reality always precedes any representation of the world (ibid. 53). Monumentalizing and constantly discussing death, the lyrical speaker endeavours to erect "a superstructure of ideas above the world of

sensory experience" (ibid. 55), to make it accessible and comprehensible – a project whose outcome is never guaranteed either success or finality.

Even though it gets verified personally and particularly, sensory experience in Hardy is something that feeds the concept of an ever-lasting continuum of being whereby physical abilities are a mere tool for probing into a reality deeper and more capacious than human understanding which is threatened by age and senility. Human history per se, on the other hand, amasses and gets refined as it represents a compendium of mutually enriching lifetimes which involve the re-occurrence and re-interpretation of natural phenomena. At the heart of this controversy lies the fact that life is a natural phenomenon whereas the conceptualization of it is a human deed, a "*mock*", as the poet says in *The Absolute Explains* (New Year's Eve, 1922, l. 66):

> II
> *"Know, Time is toothless, seen all through:*
> *The Present, that men but see,*
> *Is phasmal: since in a sane purview*
> *All things are shaped to be*
> *Eternally.*
>
> III
> *"Your 'Now' is just a gleam, a glide*
> *Across your gazing sense:*
> *With me, 'Past,' 'Future,' ever abide:*
> *They come not, go not, whence*
> *They are never hence.*
>
> (ll. 6-15)

Time, in this devotional intimation, is a human product which, metonymically, acquires the characteristics of a common mortal: it appears "*toothless*". Another poem, dedicated to the unravelling of the essence of Time (i.e. the essence of life and death) is *"So, Time"* (*The same thought resumed*). Placed after *The Absolute Explains*, it was meant to be seen as its direct sequel: a sequel to the philosophical notion of the continuity of temporal abiding whose realisation may hold some imagined efficacy for the human potential but, practically and biologically, it invalidates the assumption that one lifetime could ever be unique, outstanding or more memorable than another. Time is seen as "*a thought/ Without reality*" ("*So, Time*", ll. 10 – 11). The expression "*a leader of fashion*" from the poem of the same name may be seen as a colloquial address to a nameless human being

(female in this case) who shall never really "*know*," "*see*," "*hear*," "*watch*," "*hearken*" the essence of life. She has neither dialogised with wild nature (the birds and the storm mentioned signal at that) nor has she loved and lost – an experience that could have whetted the sense of being in time. Such nameless personae that invade Hardy's poetry are granted individuality normally through negation: the anaphoric "*never has she [done this or that…]*" (*A Leader of Fashion*). Negation, oxymoronically enough, confirms presence by way of denying its importance and making its anonymity an authenticating trace. Yet even an occasional falling of an aërolite on the earth (*The Aërolite*) – an aërolite on which "*a germ of Consciousness/ Escaped*", as the poet imagines, is helpless to cure the Earth of its "*old-established ignorance*", of its persistent and malicious disease called "*sense*", sown in it to an unknown end whilst "[…] *Maybe now/ Normal unwareness waits rebirth*" (ll. 1-2, 17, 22-23, 34-35). Notably, Hardy makes consciousness an "*untoward gift*" (ibid. l. 27), that is assumed to have come from space, from an external, unknown and unknowable abode, to the effect of humanity being an extra-terrestrial experiment. This agnostic supposition appears to be in unison with Hardy's poetic premonitions that a forward, progressive, movement of time is but a delusion, whereas backward glances, re-considerations, remembrances and visions about things gone, possess the capacity of expanding human understanding and revealing more of the nature of being which is ever just to be perceived as there are always bits of knowledge buried somewhere thus making the world "*left to be told*", despite life's toils ("*What's There To Tell*", *Song*, 190-, ll. 19-20).

Hardy saw that it was problematic for a human being, as *homo oeconomicus*, to come to terms with the notion that the universe was a stranger to man, that it most probably did not imply goodness as an achievable end, and that "biology never confronts us with a central will to live but rather with a cluster of functions tending towards a balance of internal context with respect to external context" (Ricoeur 1966: 116 – 17). An obvious difficulty in that context of inter-relatedness between internal will and external circumstances was the lack of possibility of claiming reason as a private achievement. Reason, as a product of the development of adaptive skills in a communal environment, threatened one with intellectual amputation in cases of lack of an external referee, of a verifier of one's acts and decisions (Cf. Derrida 1997: 184, 186). A posthumous factual proof of this conviction of Hardy's was that his ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey whereas his heart, which was taken out of his body before the cremation, was placed in a casket and laid in the grave of Emma Hardy among the Hardy tombs at Stinsford – both places being spots of

intensely accumulated literary and national history (Cf. Irwin, ed. 2007: 461-62). Both these two spots and Hardy's remains reciprocated in verifying one another's worth, thus reiterating the poet's belief that the process of conceptualizing human experience presupposed loss – as a source of verification of the sameness and oneness of one's identity, of otherness, and of space and time. In his poems, an occasion of death is a call-forth "*to a greening mound*" – when the lover is gone, his female partner can no longer boast stability of self-perception and so she loses willingness to relate to extrinsic reality which remains but a memory of that who is no more (as in *The Harvest-Supper*, Circa 1850, l. 31). Notably, those who are no more remain dauntingly active and encroach upon the peace of survivors, as the poet believes that life is a compilation of unfinished jobs whereby some explanation is always pending upon the living but never truly achievable: "[…] / *The folk say who pass the church-palings/ They hear inside/ Strange sounds as of anger and sadness/ That cut the heart's core,/ And shaken words bitter to madness; And then no more* " (*The Church and the Wedding*, ll. 15-20). The practice of church-restoration (in which Hardy was once involved himself and which is suggested in the above poem where a young man decides to restore a church for his own wedding which never actually takes place) demonstrates a desire to achieve a more acceptable external expression, a sense of history, of historical knowledge, but it also presupposes a uniform and formalized conservation of a type of human lore in the way the present demands/imagines that to be proper, rather than always doing justice to an original view. Interpretation simultaneously aids and deprives a phenomenon/object of an original meaning. In this sense, the grave – as a cultural epitome of man's practice of interpreting and of monumentalizing life – can be seen as an emblematic metaphoric representation of the aporeticity of going missing, of dying – an act which both abbreviates and encourages one's search for self-identification: "*Compressed here in six feet by two, / In secrecy/ To lie with me/ Till the call shall be. / Are all these things I knew, / Which cannot be handed on*" ("*Not Only I*", ll. 21-26). These lines demonstrate Hardy's conviction that wisdom is something which is, naturally speaking, buried lore: it rests in subterranean spaces and cannot be directly and didactically "*handed on*", but can only ever be sensed and consecrated. Hardy's lyrical speakers discover a pedagogy of living amidst ruins of the past which are always more abundant than features of the present, even in cases where those remnants amount to the "*mummied skeleton*" of a withered flower (*The Flower's Tragedy*, ll. 5-6) or the "*waste*" of war-horse bones that take only a year to "*bleach*"

(*Horses Abroad*, ll. 9-10). Living equals realizing the unbalance between the future and the past in favour of the past whose remains function as the lyrical speaker's empirical proof of his own presence (see also *Under High-Stoy Hill*).

The poet must have been critical of architectural restoration as he acknowledged that it meant, above all else, a desire to bracket experience, to make a place/item of historical validity more readily available to an average lot of professionally trained but oftentimes thick-headed assortment of human beings who would stumble upon history, rather than work towards understanding and maintaining its original merit. He perceived that comprehension, too, was a result of our historical interrelatedness and therefore called for a sympathetic and forgiving attitude to cases of failure to grasp an original meaning. In the poem *Inscriptions for a Peal of Eight Bells* we witness the transformation of a bell from a silver-made enormous source of life cast originally in 1500, to a weak and "*whining*" 1729 re-cast, through to a restored 1853 melted fake, to finally reach the 1900 poor tin anonymous reminiscence of a once vigorous epitome of faith – now without a canon on its "*head*", looking "*scalped, scraped, and dead*" (ll. 6, 17-18, 20-21). Whilst stooping to their own mediocrity, men invalidate the bell's original appearance: its silver gets "*drained*" so that by now any "*dolt*" can swing it (whereas before it took at least two men to do that). "*Stealing*" the original metal stands for the process of gradual loss of awareness of the original meaning of this piece of art; it also stands for the advent of a more pragmatically minded, technocratic view of life where objects, people and events matter in so far as they could be found to be generally useful – an age where history is done by "*dolts*", by fools, and where life appears to be a clownish distortion of an original intention to make change and improve. An age of oblivion where it is safe and healthy not to bother with the consecration of that which differed from the established order of mediocrity and mercantile self-interest: an age that fears erecting monuments to a Byron, Shelley or Swinburne, the Poet's Corner thus being a resting place of obedience, conventionality and creed-adherence (see *A Refusal*, August 1924). An age where men have forgotten about the fact that devices of estimating time imply the need to measure time, itself a consequence of the need to time one's worth in relationship with others and possibly with an ultimate, though empirically unproven, source of life (see *The Sundial on a Wet Day*). Products of man's desire to consecrate time (such as tombstones, church-bells, clocks etc.) show man's aspiration to truth, but they also bring about a sense of uncertainty about our own standards which may be

seen to lead to the recognition of the need to habituate tradition whereby the only truth achievable is the realization of our own finitude. The latter is a non-optional and non-arbitrary lesson that life teaches to each human being, making existence a "type of commerce", of constant vital exchange between one and another, as well as one and many, rather than just "transference of knowledge through compelling proof" (Cf. Gadamer 1994a: 27, 29; Gadamer 1994b: 43).

* * *

Nobodies and No-Knows

Each single case of personalized misfortune is suggestive of generic inescapability and tragedy. The anonymity of many instances of loss of orientation, reputation, self-respect or sense of living imparts to this collection of poems the particularity of a purposefully selected lot of instances where all the participants – irrespective of the fact whether they have been granted an identity/name or not – appear to be nobodies and no-knows. Rash decision-making or obscurity through ordinariness and un-eventfulness lead equally "successfully" to loss of recognition and at the same time confirm the uniqueness of all such similar fates/lives/instances/personae despite their dullness. In *The Turnip-Hoer* a poor man dissipates all his fortune whilst "investing it" in the idolization of the Duchess of Southernshire whom he incidentally saves from a crash. Gambling his sense of familial duty, he pawns his watch, in effect his life and dies alone, killed by a train after delirious drinking, as we learn from the Duke's incidental account of that accident as reflected in the paper (see esp. Ll. 29-32, 37-40, 61-64, 70-73, 82-97). In *Coming up Oxford Street: Evening* (as seen in July, 1872) we get a retrospective impressionist glimpse of an intensely "*glaring*" sun, contrasted to "*a city-clerk's*" desperation over a sense of "*wondering why he was born*". The sun's prominence simultaneously eclipses the man and re-confirms his anonymity as it "*dazzles*" his weak pupils unable to find a focus in being (ll. 1-4, 15-20). Similarly, in *A Sheep Fair*, autumn "*torrents*" drench and annihilate the "*throngs of sheep*", gathered at the "*autumn fair*", the "*auctioneer*", the shepherds, the dogs (with "*tucked-in tails*"), and the buyers. The "*postscript*" of the poem laments "*the hoarse auctioneer's death*", as well as the demise of "*all the dripping buyers*", and the fact that "*every flock long since has bled*", thus tying them into the common lot of uneventful, repetitively toilsome and nameless departure from a universe where fates begin to matter as long as they become objects of posthumous analysis (ll.

1-3, 7, 17-18, 25-27).[8] It would appear that death is not only expected but striven for by a mere act of inscribing, or monumentalizing someone in one's diary, thus incurring his end which turns out to be an end sought, desired and therefore rewarding, in a world where only "*the eve-lit weir [...] sons and gurgles*" and the "*towered church*" on the rise keeps vigil over the departure of the lyrical speaker's friend who dies as soon as the lyrical speaker has him interred into the "*chalk mound*" which he draws with his pencil in his book (*Before My Friend Arrived*, ll. 1-2, 4-13, 19-20).

In Hardy, death not only seems unpreventable: it is, rather, at all times implied, summoned, brought about through ignorance, unresponsiveness and thick-headedness. Thus, in *The Bird-Catcher's Boy* (November 21, 1912), a father loses his son to the sea, as the boy disappears after an argument with his father over his profession. The caged birds which "*bruise and bleed in jail*" iterate the boy's own captivity and suggested his future profession from which he escapes falling prey to the ocean whose tide washes away "*one sailor boy*" (ll. 1-8, 25-32, 37-38, 65-68). The double irony is that, one the one hand the boy fails to achieve identity as someone with a different profession: he dies anonymously. On the other hand he dies as the runaway son of a man with a recognized profession: a bird-gaoler. The young man and his father are mutually (re)-confirmed through the father's occupation and the son's tragic opposition to that. The description of the birds "*hanging*" (ll. 37-38) hints at the boy's own future tragedy. The poem was composed five days prior to Emma Hardy's own death. It is rather probable that Emma was an implied prototype of the "*caged*" boy, as the final years of her relationship with Hardy had also been marked by anonymity and stifling internal imprisonment from which she must have escaped through death. It seems unlikely that she could have assumed that her existence as a whole, but especially her death, would prove turning points in her husband's poetic development which unfolded as contemplation of often stray, anonymous, mutually unrelated cases of loss and deprivation – biological and spiritual. Hardy grasped the marketability of one lifetime for another: that of a babe yet unborn but already classified as a terrible mistake that needed mending (as in *A Hurried Meeting*, where a young woman decides to pass off her

[8] Michael Irwin shares: "the sight of animals being taken to market or driven to slaughter always roused in Hardy feelings of intense pity, as he well knew, as must anyone living in or near a market-town, how much needless suffering is inflicted. In his note-book at this time he writes: December (1st week) – Walking with F. by railway saw bullocks and cows going to Islington (?) for slaughter" (Irwin, ed. 2007: 445). Hardy made this entry in his diary in December 1926 – about a year before his death.

yet unborn child as her mother's for fear of becoming an outcast through an unprofitable marriage with an inferior man, see esp. ll. 19-31, 37-38, 53-55). Suggestive of a dead person's anonymity and of the survivor's own stifled existential guilt is also the poem *A Leaving*, where the observer watches the "*brown-curtained*", "*rain-smitten back of [a] car*" whose contents are known to him, as he remembers "the sullen November air" (ll. 1-3, 5, 11-12; we should remind ourselves again that Emma passed away in November). In the last poem of this collection we read the poet's craving for a better sphere of existence of his beloved person(s), his hopes, dreams and memories. He is unable to achieve that, trapped within the "*mechanic repetitions*" and the "*dinning gear*" of reason which prevents him from reaching a state of liberating equilibrium (Cf. ll. 5-10). Hardy never overcame the hermeneutical vice of being caught within his memories – themselves a result of, as well as an expression of, his well-developed linguistic awareness. Caught in the hermeneutical situation of being amidst a multitude, he recognized the multifarious use and applicability of language as a means of preservation and of manipulation of physical empirics and actual events (Cf. Gadamer 1994b: 40, 45). He appears to have accepted the fact of man's bodily valuation of social imperatives and experiences. He hungered for knowledge and he thus historicized all experiences, claiming their equal importance in building a wholesome image of a world of inter-dependent controversial occurrences and seemingly disembodied abstract ideas. His receptivity in examining social values, however, was indivisibly tied to his recognition of the fact *that self-objectivity was an impossible project, that one could not hope to be a "disembodied* spectator" in a world of mutual dependence and of values that were at once social and organic (Cf. Ricoeur 1966: 122-25).

The poet considered the lapse of time a productive opportunity for re-evaluating one's achievements, for measuring one's own volume against that of others. Somehow, it appeared that it made no difference whether the poetic profession had been assumed as a result of internal necessity and personal conviction, or whether one had become a poet by luck of circumstance and by readers' demand (or practical applicability): it was indeed the historical distance that validated one's worth and confirmed one's uniqueness:

"April 30 – By the will of God some men are born poetical. Of these some make themselves practical poets, others are made poets **by lapse of time** who were hardly recognized as such. Particularly has this been the case with the translators of the Bible. They translated into the language of their age; then **the**

years began to corrupt that language as spoken, and **to add grey lichen** to the translation; until the moderns who use **the corrupted tongue** marvel at the poetry of the **old words**. When new they were not more than half so poetical. So that Coverdale, Tyndale, and the rest of them **are as ghosts what they never were in flesh**." (Hardy 2007: 395)

The words bold-typed in this diary entry of Hardy's (30th April, 1918) clearly indicate that true appreciation lies beyond the visible. Whilst living men may only work towards it, it is the lapse of time that verifies the true worth of a presence and that verification always involves the participation of others whose rediscovery of the old proves that interpretation represents a constant dichotomous exchange between certainty and doubt, stability and dissolution, image and original. In literary history, just like in architecture, interpretation means at once resting on, and challenging, earlier modes of expression. The building of sense registers corruption as proof of previousness: previous discourses of thought and of self-expression which may conceptually be termed "layers of time". Hardy considered that the amassment of these layers which appeared both attractive and daunting urged men to organize them into scientific theories and seek for one common cause of origin. The search for meaning meant peering harder and seeing in most "unintelligent forces", in most contradictory and marginal elements, an opportunity for sensitive and creative production, for poetry: "assume a thousand unconscious causes – lumped together in poetry as one Cause, or God – and bear in mind that a coloured liquid can be produced by the mixture of colourless ones, a noise by the juxtaposition of silences, etc., etc" (diary entry, December, 1920, Hardy 2007: 421). The significance of incident and variety in Hardy ultimately takes us to the gradualist idea of interrelatedness in communal and historical being where truth is what works, what binds people together, itself being a historical (i.e. corruptible) product, a product of temporal being – elusiveness/emptiness/meaninglessness at one point, and steadiness/fullness/sense at another (Cf. Hardy 2007: 438).

* * *

One Common Truth

That death is the ultimate metaphoric expression of the dichotomies freedom/constraint, choice/circumstance, temporal definability/timeless variability, precision/generality, actuality/past, becomes obvious when we read the poem *The Six Boards*:

***Six boards belong to me**:*
I do not know where they may be;
If growing green, or lying dry
In a cockloft nigh.

Some morning I shall claim them,
And who may then possess will aim them
To bring me those boards I need
With thoughtful speed.

But though they hurry so
To yield me mine, ***I shall not know***
How well my want they'll have supplied
When notified.

Those boards and I – how much
***In common we**, of feel and touch*
Shall share thence on, – earth's far core-quakings,
Hill-shocks, tide-shakings–

Yea, hid where none will note,
The once live tree and man, remote
From mundane hurt as if on Venus, Mars,
Or furthest stars.

Biological growth is always paralleled by growth of meaning: the boards that have once been the branches of a living tree may be used for a coffin which commemorates the lifetime contribution of a particular living creature thus also showing the survivors' intention to memorialize and consecrate life, which, in effect, is a way of self-expression. Ironically, conscientious preparation for death is not always guaranteed reciprocity on the part of heirs who may fail to acknowledge a dying person's request which, on a semiotic level, brings about a contradiction between intended meaning and realised meaning (ll. 10 – 12). An occasion of death always also confirms the link between man and nature, as well as between men themselves in their most hyperbolic common unachieved but scientifically projected goals (ll. 13 – 14, 22 – 24). The poem unequivocally suggests the issue of relativity – of physical dimensions and of abstract philosophical concepts and reasoning – so that life may be said to rest internally on approximation to the truth. Truth can only ever be a rough estimate where understanding as such rests on metonymic leaps, thrusts into variable essences where the moment of choice at once

solves a problem and creates a new one.[9] Laughable and limited as human beings are, final and uncouth though society may be, Hardy shows us in this poetic collection of his that it is this temporal and spatial limitedness, this unpredictability of existence, this imbecility in managing grand eternal issues, that offer a horizon of expectations which reaches out further than our capacities may allow us at present, thus binding us into one common truth. The common truth of coming to terms with finality and with lack as the surest path towards self-understanding as appreciating above all else difference, otherness, exteriority and the past.

LITERATURE

Derrida 1997: Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship.* Trans. Georg Collins. London: Verso, 1997.

Gadamer 1994a: Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Truth in the Human Sciences. trans. Bruce Wachterhauser. // Bruce R. Wachterhauser. *Hermeneutics and Truth*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1994, 25-32.

Gadamer 1994b: Gadamer, Hans-Georg. What Is Truth? trans. Bruce Wachterhauser. // Bruce R. Wachterhauser. *Hermeneutics and Truth*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1994, 33-46.

Hardy 1995: Hardy, Thomas. *The Works of Thomas Hardy.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995.

Hardy 2007: Hardy, Thomas and Florence. *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928.* Ware. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2007.

Irwin, ed. 2007: *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928.* Ed. M. Irwin. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2007.

Ricoeur 1966: Ricoeur, Paul. *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary.* Trans. and intr. Erazim V. Kohak. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1966.

Scheler 1976: Scheler, Max. *Man's Place in Nature.* Trans. and intr. Hans Meyerhoff. New York: The Noonday Press, 1976.

[9] "The event of choice always permits two readings: on the one hand it is tied to the preceding examination whose end, or, more exactly, *resolution* it is; on the other hand it genuinely *inaugurates* the project as a simple intention of future action. […] We shall not forget that this temporal and, so to speak, horizontal paradox of continuity and discontinuity in process sums up the vertical paradox of motivation and project, that is, finally, of the involuntary and the voluntary. The event of choice is precisely the practical reconciliation of the paradox in the moment which simultaneously brings the process to a resolution and bursts forth into novelty" (Ricoeur 1966: 164, 168).